فناء الموت: التصور الوجودي للارواح والموت في القصص القصيرة لامبروز بيرس

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The Impermanence of Death: Ontological Imagination Regarding Souls and Death in the Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce

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الملخص

أمبروز بيرس (1842–1914)، وهو كاتب وشاعر وصحفي أمريكي، مكانةً متميزة في الأدب الأمريكي، وذلك بسبب تنوع أشكال كتاباته وأنواعها الأدبية. ومع ذلك، فعلى الرغم من تنوع أعماله، تبرز فكرة مشتركة في كتاباته القصصية والصحفية، وهي الموت

يتميّز بيرس بقدرته على تصوير الموت من خلال الخيال الواسع والعمق الفلسفي. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل معالجته للموضوعات المرعبة، ودراسة الكيفية التي يشكّك بها في الفكرة السائدة التي تنظر إلى الموت بوصفه حالة دائمة وثابتة

وبالاستناد إلى نظريات فرح مندلسون ومارك وولف، يعتمد البحث على ثلاث قصص قصيرة لبيرس، وهي: «ساعة جون بارتين»، و«النافذة المغلقة بالألواح الخشبية»، و«متشرّد

رضيع»، وذلك للكشف عن الكيفية التي يتحدى بها الكاتب الفهم التقليدي لفناء الإنسان، من خلال تقديم الموت بوصفه حالة غير مستقرة، قابلة للتحول والتغير، وقد لا تكون نهائية

ويذهب البحث إلى أن بيرس يتجاوز النظر إلى الموت باعتباره نهايةً للحياة، ليقدّمه بوصفه حالة تحوّلية تضعف الحدود الفاصلة بين المادي وغير المادي، وكذلك بين الكائن الحي والجماد. ومن خلال ذلك، يحوّل بيرس قصص الرعب إلى استكشاف فلسفي لمجموعة من الأسئلة الوجودية المتعلقة بطبيعة الواقع، والعلاقة بين الفلسفة والعلم، والحدود الفاصلة بينهما، مقدّمًا تأملات عميقة بشأن مفهومي الموت والروح

Abstract

Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914), American author, poet, and journalist inhabits an intriguing position in the American literary canon due to his diverse forms and genres of writings. However, despite the diversity of his works, there exists a common thread across his fiction and journalism and that is – death. Bierce holds a proficiency in representing death with both acute imagination and great philosophical depth. The aim of this paper is to analyse his treatment of the macabre subject matter and to investigate how he problematizes the mainstream idea of permanence of death. Using the theories of Farah Mendlesohn and Mark J.P. Wolf as a scaffolding, the paper relies on three of Bierce's short stories, – "John Bartine's Watch," "The Boarded Window," and "A Baby Tramp" – to demonstrate how the author challenges conventionally-held understanding of human mortality by foregrounding death as an unstable condition, capable of being a negotiable and transformative process, with the possibility of being impermanent. The paper argues that Bierce elevates death from merely being an ending to a transformative state which dilutes the boundaries between the material and the immaterial as well as those between the animate and the inanimate. In doing so, Bierce transforms horror fiction to a philosophical exploration of various ontological questions about the nature of reality, the porous boundaries between philosophy and science, and offering important reflections on the concepts of death and soul.

Introduction

Death is viewed as the end to one's existence. That is how it is seen across religious and philosophical traditions. Even scientific objectivism posits death as marking the threshold which separates the living from the dead. Literary texts, however, have frequently explored alternatives to this certainty by imagining realities in which death is not the end. They have often imaginatively constructed, through supernatural events consisting of spectral presences and liminal conscious states, alternative

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possibilities about the fate of the human soul and the persistence of identity beyond one's demise. Such imaginative engagements with death are particularly prominent in horror and supernatural fiction. In such fiction, the boundaries between life and death are repeatedly questioned and constructed as unstable.

Among American writers of the nineteenth century, Ambrose Bierce occupies a unique position for this. Best known for his darkly ironic style and fascination with mortality, Bierce consistently wrote fiction that explored the uncertainties surrounding death and perception where human consciousness is concerned. The time period of the nineteenth century provides important context for his writings. As Rosemary Jackson puts it, "Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context… From about 1800 onwards, those fantasies produced within a capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture. They are peculiarly violent and horrific." (2). Although Jackson is positing capitalism as a debilitating psychological force that produces horror, it is just as important to note that the empirical drive to make everything explicable also produced a counter-desire to explore what is still unknowable in the world. Similarly, Bierce's short stories frequently depict situations in which characters find their ordinary assumptions about reality disrupted by inexplicable events or psychological ambiguities, as he frequently imagines death as a permeable boundary that can be rendered uncertain, or even contested. Consequently, his fiction invites readers to consider alternative ontological possibilities in which the categories of life and death are no longer stable.

These depictions can be understood through the concept of ontological imagination. This concept, as presented here, means the imaginative construction of alternative existences that challenge accepted views of what exists in reality, i.e., ontology. In Bierce's fiction, ontological imagination is woven into narratives that question the permanence of death. Through narrative devices such as unexplained temporal disturbances and uncertain liminal states between the dead and the living, Bierce explores the idea of an impermanent death, constructing realities that cannot be explained with empirical observation, and speculating on the nature of existence itself.

Through the theories of Farah Mendlesohn and Mark J. P. Wolf in the field of fantasy and imaginary worlds, this paper examines the ontological imagination in Bierce's short stories "John Bartine's Watch,' "The Boarded Window," and "A Baby Tramp," and shows that although these stories differ in plot and narrative structure, all three challenge the

conventional understanding of mortality by presenting death as an unstable and negotiable condition. By employing supernatural and uncanny elements, Bierce imagines alternate realities in which agency and identity may persist beyond physical death.

Drawing upon aforementioned theoretical perspectives on imagination and alternative ontologies, this paper argues that Bierce's stories construct a vision of death that is not permanent. Rather, he brings forth a version of death as a transformative state that destabilizes the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, the living and the dead. In doing so, Bierce employs horror fiction as a means of exploring profound ontological questions concerning the nature of reality, with views, which examine the persistence of the soul and the impermanence of death itself.

Literature Review

Critical engagement with Ambrose Bierce's short fiction has long oscillated between efforts to anchor him within the dominant current of American literary realism and a smaller but persistent body of scholarship recognizing in his work a far more unstable, romantic, and Gothic sensibility. Robert A. Wiggins's (1971) "Ambrose Bierce: A Romantic in an Age of Realism" presents this argument precisely, when he argues that "to pin the label of 'realist' upon Ambrose Bierce is possible only if one distorts reality," since that label sticks only when readers prematurely judge him "by one or two stories most frequently reprinted in anthologies" (p. 1). For Wiggins, Bierce's work is best represented not by his photographic and realistic verisimilitude of his most famous war stories but by his "more frequent preoccupation with the outré, the bizarre, the grisly grotesque, and the Gothic" (p. 1). Tracing a rich genealogy running from Charles Brockden Brown and Poe into the twentieth-century "dark tradition" of Faulkner, Hemingway, and the Southern Gothic, Wiggins situates Bierce within a mode defined by "the use of abnormal and heightened psychological states," by characters "distorted as grotesque, flawed, or alienated personalities," and by a "drama [that] lies within the soul, unconscious, subconscious, psyche, personality, or spirit of the individual" rather than in external social or political reality (p. 4). Most significantly for this study, Wiggins reads Bierce's definition of "ghost" in *The Devil's Dictionary* as "the outward and visible sign of an inward fear" and as the key to his supernatural fiction generally: "the ghost story was a symbolic projection of horror, terror, and fear that his characters experienced as psychological states. The mind creates its own hell projected upon the visible world" (p. 7). This quote shows how Bierce's tales not just illustrate or hint at

alternative realities but generate them, supports the central theme of this paper: that Bierce's horror fiction does not merely use the Gothic as ornamentation but constructs deeply philosophical alternative ontologies which postpone the finality of death.

Furthermore, scholars like Donald T. Blume provide evidence into Bierce's lifelong fascination with the instability of the boundary between life and death – the liminality of the boundaries between the two. Drawing on Bierce's "Prattle" columns for the *San Francisco Examiner* and the newspaper's garish and sensational coverage of executions, Blume demonstrates that Bierce possessed precise technical knowledge of the physiology of hanging that directly informs the "twist" ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." To prove his point, he cites Bierce' own observation, offered as journalistic fact in 1888, that "[i]t is known that in no case can death ensue, in the medical sense, in much less than a quarter of an hour" (Bierce qtd. in Blume 152), and shows that contemporary readers would have understood Peyton Farquhar's (the protagonist of the short story) hallucinatory escape as occurring across the full interval during which his body, in Bierce's own words, "swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge" (p. 155). For Blume, this technical interval – the period in which "the term corpse... can technically refer to either a dead or a living body" – is precisely the imaginative space Bierce exploits: "If Peyton Farquhar's heart and brain could function for some fifteen minutes after that fatal drop... then Peyton Farquhar had ample time to imagine every last detail of his vision" (p. 152; 155). Blume's essay proves useful in helping establish that Bierce's narrative strategy of treating death as a negotiable and temporary transition was a lifelong fascination, visible in all of his works.

When one speaks of the liminality of death, Bierce's literary influences, it becomes imperative to also discuss his debt to Poe. Arthur M. Miller (1932) is one such scholar who has attempted to trace this literary heritage. He quotes Bierce, who confesses to his publisher Walter Neale: "I am an imitator of Poe. Poe wrote tragic tales of the supernatural; so do I" (p. 135). Both the writers shared aesthetic principles as well as believed that "a story may be terrible but must not be horrible—there is a difference." Miller also catalogues their shared supernatural devices under the heading of plot, device, and idea (p. 137). Additionally, Miller compares Poe's "Morella" with Bierce's "John Bartine's Watch" and "The Death of Halpin Frayser" as instances in which identity passes from Poe to Bierce, while also highlighting how both the authors of macabre penned various tales of the displaced self (p. 145). Miller goes on to

document Bierce's extensive use of premature burial, noting that he used it extensively and singles out the parallel between Poe's Baltimore case in his "The Premature Burial" and Bierce's "The Boarded Window," in which a pioneer's wife, prematurely judged dead, is discovered to have fought off a panther that attempted to drag her away, her corpse later showing "signs of having fought the intruder" (p. 147). Miller's work provides an important scaffolding to help readers understand that Bierce's writings belong to a niche explicitly concerned with the survival of selfhood across the threshold of death – which is also the main thematic concern of this paper.

Sharon Talley's (2009) book *Ambrose Bierce and the Dance of Death* is, perhaps, the most well-wrought theorization of death in Bierce's fiction – albeit she approaches the topic through a psychoanalytic lens. Talley proposes, through her text, to fill what she calls "missing psychological dimension" of Bierce scholarship by reading his obsession with death through post-Freudian death theory, particularly the work of Otto Rank (p. xv). In the fourth chapter of her book, Talley shows that Bierce's recurrent use of the double or doppelgänger motif encodes "the fear of death associated with identity crisis" while simultaneously gesturing toward what Rank calls "the ancestral and universal belief in the immortal self. Talley argues that this belief once allowed the human personality "to develop... an essential totality," but that in modern literature the double appears "not as a symbol of immortality but rather of death" (p. 43). She moves beyond Bierce's fiction and extends her argument by reading Bierce's autobiographical and biographical texts as firsthand accounts of this doubling. Her work becomes indispensable for establishing the background that Bierce's fiction possesses a preoccupation with the instability of the boundary between self and death, soul and body, the living and the dead. Her psychoanalytic framing, however, interprets this instability primarily as literary symptom of unresolved personal and cultural death-related anxiety. This allows a gap which can probe his work as not a residue but rather as a deliberate ontological project which questions the rigidity of the boundaries between the binaries of life and death.

Read together, these four studies trace a critical arc from questions of Bierce's place in the literary canon and his classification to the psychoanalytic interpretation of his works. All of the above-mentioned texts touch upon different aspects of Bierce's preoccupation with death, but they do not fully anticipate his fiction's ontological dimensions. It is precisely this gap that the paper seeks to address – an account of how his

fiction reimagines death as transformative, his presentation of alternative ontologies, and how he uses horror fiction to achieve his goals.

Theoretical Framework

This paper examines how Bierce deals with death in his fiction through ontological imagination, defined here as the literary capacity to envision alternative modes of existence and reality beyond the ordinary limits of human experience. It examines how, in Bierce's short stories, the supernatural frequently undermines stable empirical reality, causing readers to think about possibilities that lie beyond the conventional understanding of mortality. The notion of alternative ontologies is useful for examining narratives that imagine realities different from those which are accepted in everyday life. It examines how, in Bierce's short stories, the supernatural frequently undermines stable empirical reality, causing readers to think about possibilities that lie beyond the conventional understanding of mortality.

The notion of alternative ontologies is useful for examining narratives that imagine realities different from those which are accepted in everyday life. In his work, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) argues that imaginative literature creates coherent worlds which are governed by their own structures and principles:

When a large number of elements… are combined in a consistent fashion, a kind of world logic starts to form, by which one can see how a world works and how its various systems are interrelated. This logic may cover everything from social customs to the laws governing magic or the limitation of technology, to even laws of physics which differ from those of the primary world, which all help to establish the ontological rules of the secondary world. (p. 53)

Here, Wolf uses the Tolkienesque terminology of referring to worlds in which the primary world is the real world, and the secondary world is the imaginary one. Wolf's work primarily addresses fantasy and speculative fiction, but his emphasis on world building provides a valuable framework for understanding how literary texts construct realities that differ from ordinary experience. Such texts can be said to create miniature imaginary worlds of their own as they become defined by the ontological principles that govern them. Consequently, a narrative can present alternative understandings of time, identity, causality, or death while remaining grounded in social environments which are recognizable. Wolf terms such worlds as overlaid worlds. "Here we find what we might call 'overlaid worlds'… In such cases, fictional elements are overlaid onto a real location, but without separating a secondary world from the

primary world." (p. 28). In other words, there is no other-than-real world to enter, but the imaginative elements still set the world apart.

This perspective can be applied to Bierce's stories which bring the supernatural into otherwise realistic settings. They subsequently create a narrative space in which the effective finality of death is questioned. Through imaginative constructions that use the supernatural, the stories ask the reader to consider realities in which the boundaries between life and death are permeable, rather than being absolute.

The present study also uses Farah Mendlesohn's (2008) concept of fantasy as a mode in which the reader engages with the fantastic. In her work *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, she argues that the importance of fantasy lies in the manner through which supernatural elements interact with the narrative world. "That reader position to which I will keep pointing, while on the one hand a reference to our ideal and implied reader, is also an invitation to construct a fictionalized self who can accept the construction of the rhetoric of a particular fantastic text… Fantasy is constructed with precision through point of view. Like a perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in the wrong place, the image/experience will not resolve." (p. xviii). This idea is useful in examining Bierce's fiction because the reader encounters supernatural disruptions through a familiar reality rather than through entry into a separate fantastic realm. Instead of being a separate realm, the supernatural intrudes upon familiar reality and destabilizes accepted perceptions of existence. Indeed, such fantastic elements of intrusion are associated with horror. Mendlesohn's explanation of intrusion fantasy applies equally well to Bierce's short fiction. She writes, "In intrusion fantasy the fantastic is the bringer of chaos… It is horror and amazement. It takes us out of safety without taking us from our place." (p. xxi, xxii). Bierce's short stories similarly often introduce the supernatural in the middle of normal life, disrupting expectations and making things feel unpredictable and unsafe.

Mendlesohn's work on fantasy allows these short stories to be examined as imaginative explorations of ontological uncertainties about whether death is permanent, as Bierce uses fantastic elements in his stories to explore alternatives to the idea that death is a clear, irreversible end. Towards that end, unexplained phenomena and liminal states between life and death serve as narrative devices and the means of questioning what humans know about themselves. The following analysis examines how these alternative ontologies emerge in "The Boarded Window," "John Bartine's Watch," and "A Baby Tramp," where death appears as a condition of uncertainty and transformation.

"The Boarded Window:" Death as a Liminal State

"The Boarded Window" is one of the clearest examples of the depiction of ontological uncertainty in regards to life and death from among Bierce's short stories. Set on an isolated frontier, The story seems to portray ordinary events. The narrator, one of the inhabitants of the area, speaks of the life of Murlock, a solitary frontiersman one of the windows of whose cabin is mysteriously boarded. The account of his wife's illness and subsequent death is related as the reason for this, along with the disturbing events that followed. Believing his wife to be dead, Murlock prepared her for her funeral, gently binding her hands in the process. However, as he yet had to make a coffin for her, he could not bury her and waited for daylight to get to work. During the night, a panther entered through the cabin's window and attempted to drag the woman's body away. Murlock awakened in panic and discovered evidence that she may not have been entirely dead, or perhaps, was confronted with the ontological uncertainty that corpses retain some manner of consciousness. The author leaves the ambiguity for the reader. The revelation, marked by the fragment of the panther's ear between the woman's teeth, and her unbound hands, indicated that she retained some consciousness and agency during the attack.

From the perspective of examining ontological imagination, the significance of this episode lies in the alternative understanding of death that it constructs. The narrative imagines a reality in which death is a state that may exist between presence and absence, consciousness and unconsciousness. It therefore constructs death as a liminal state. The certainty tied to biological death becomes unreliable. The ways through which human beings understand mortality become insufficient to explain what occurred. In this manner, Bierce alters one of the most basic views of reality: that the dead can be distinguished from the living.

Wolf's concept of overlaid worlds is helpful in looking at this disruption. The story remains grounded in the familiar reality of a frontier setting. The social environment and physical landscape remain recognizable, but the rules governing mortality, overlaid on the ordinary, become unstable. As a result, the narrative becomes present in an overlaid world in which accepted knowledge regarding life and death cannot be trusted. Furthermore, the ambiguity regarding the distinction between life and death becomes in itself a part of the world logic. As Wolf puts it, "A world logic does not need to be so rigorous as to fill every gap definitively; there will always be room for ambiguity, especially in word-based media that leaves visualization to its reader's imagination." (p. 53). Hence, the very ambiguity present in the text is a part of the world logic of ontological uncertainty in Bierce's text.

Mendlesohn's notion of intrusion fantasy is also very relevant here. The terrifying element of the story emerges from the intrusion of the inexplicable into everyday life. A routine act of mourning is transformed into a confrontation with the unknown. Mendlesohn (2008) writes

Because the drive of intrusion fantasy is to be investigated and made transparent, description is intense and it is assumed that we, the readers, are engaged with the ignorance of the point of view character, usually the protagonist… Escalation, of many kinds, is an important element of the rhetoric. (p. xxii)

This is evident in the description of the corpse when Murlock views it in daylight. At first the description looks ordinary after an event of having been attacked by a panther. "The Clothing was deranged, the long hair in disorder, the limbs lay anyhow." Then, the author escalates. "The ribbon with which he had bound the wrists was broken; the hands were tightly clenched. Between the teeth was the fragment of the animal's ear." (Bierce, "Boarded" 2020c, p. 91). The horror originates from the collapse of familiar assumptions about existence, as death, which ordinarily should provide certainty and closure, instead becomes a source of ambiguity and fear. Was the woman not dead? Do corpses retain consciousness?

Furthermore, the story demonstrates the human fear of the unknowability of what comes after death. As Claire Hines and Jacqueline Furby (2012) state, "Some fantasy monsters… are manufactured by us, and others symbolize our inner desires, struggles and fears." (ch. 4). Hence in Bierce's story, the horror resulting from the ambiguity occurs due to the very human fear of not knowing the consequences of mortality. Whether the woman hadn't died, or whether death causes the corpse to be in a liminal state remains a matter of speculation by the reader. The story shows how Bierce's imagination questions the usual views of death by creating boundaries which are permeable and uncertain. Rather than functioning as a definitive endpoint, death emerges as a liminal threshold the nature of which remains beyond complete human comprehension.

"John Bartine's Watch:" Death Beyond Temporality

While "The Boarded Window" blurs the boundaries between life and death, "John Bartine's Watch" stretches this ontological uncertainty into time and causality. The story is narrated by a physician who recounts an evening spent with his friend John Bartine. During their conversation, Bartine reveals the strange history of the watch on his person, inherited from his grandfather, a royalist who disappeared after being arrested during the American Revolution. Although the watch eventually returned to the family, it retained an unsettling influence over its owner. Every

evening before eleven o'clock, Bartine experiences a profound sense of dread accompanied by an irresistible impulse to look at the watch. Attempting to cure what he thinks to be a psychological affliction, the physician, at two minutes before twelve, turns back the watch one hour and returns it to Bartine, inadvertently triggering Bartine's death. When Bartine looks at the watch when it shows eleven, he collapses, and a mark resembling the one caused by a hangman's noose appears around his neck. "…when the body had been prepared for burial, a faint dark circle was seen to have developed around the neck." (Bierce, 2020b, "John" 123)"

The significance of this event lies in the manner through which Bierce connects death to temporality. The physician speculates that Bartine's grandfather was executed by hanging at eleven o'clock and the fear, and the causality, associated with the moment has somehow persisted beyond the original death. Whether this persistence results from reincarnation, ancestral memory, or a supernatural connection between grandfather and grandson is left unresolved. "Nor can I set limitations to the law of heredity. I do not know that in the spiritual world a sentiment or emotion may not survive the heart that held it, and seek expression in a kindred life, ages removed." (Bierce, 2020b "John" 123). Nevertheless, the story imagines a reality in which the causality of death does not remain confined to a single moment in the past. Instead, the consequences reach across generations and continue to affect the living.

Wolf's concept of alternative ontologies is of help in understanding this phenomenon. Again, the story takes place in an otherwise typical nineteenth century setting, yet the watch functions as an object that unsettles ordinary assumptions regarding time and causality. It therefore becomes a narrative thread. Wolf defines it thus. "…a chain of events, often referred to as a narrative thread, typically revolves around the experiences of a particular character, place, or even an inanimate object, as in the film *The Red Violin* (1998), which follows the same violin over three centuries…" (p. 199). The watch similarly becomes a narrative thread in ways that are causal and temporal. As a result, rather than remaining confined to the past, the consequences of a historical event continue to influence the present. The past intrudes. The grandfather's execution remains relevant long after his life ends. The watch becomes the carrier of the causal relationship which suggests that traumatic events might influence the present long after they have ended. In this way, Bierce constructs an overlaid world in which death continues to exert influence across time, and the watch represents the narrative causal link which makes this influence possible.

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The story also embodies Mendlesohn's concept of intrusion fantasy, as the supernatural element enters an ordinary social setting through what seems to be a harmless family heirloom. What initially appears to be a psychological eccentricity evolves into the proof of a reality that goes beyond rational explanation. As Mendlesohn explains, "The trajectory of the intrusion fantasy is from denial to acceptance. …the narrative leads always toward the acceptance of the fantastic, by the reader if not the protagonist." (p. 115). The physician's attempt to impose ordinary logic on the situation fails and the intrusion of the fantastic culminates in Bartine's sudden death. From a denial of the fantastic, the physician is therefore forced to accept its intrusion, along with the realization that John Bartine has inadvertently become his victim as the watch may have indeed resulted in causality that is not possible for rationality to grasp. Through the watch, Bierce imagines death as a force capable of disrupting temporal order and causal certainty. The story suggests that mortality may leave traces that persist beyond the moment of physical death, linking past and present perhaps through mysterious continuations of consciousness and identity. In doing so, "John Bartine's Watch" presents death as an ontological condition the effects of which remain active across time itself.

Again, the uncertainty and psychological ambiguity of events is a part of the story. Tzvetan Todorov describes the uncertainty itself as a part of the fantastic. Once, if in the familiar world, if one encounters that cannot be explained with the laws of this same world, then one has to settle for one of two solutions; either the event was an illusion, or the reality is controlled by laws unknown. "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty." Once an answer is chosen, the fantastic becomes the marvelous or uncanny (p. 25). In Bierce's story, John Bartine did die. But the events that led to it are slightly shrouded in psychological ambiguity. Did Bartine suffer from a psychological affliction? Did being tricked into looking at the watch when it showed the time before eleven cause an amount of dread which killed him? The presence of an inexplicable dread tied to a certain timing suggests that it is not so, along with the presence of the noose mark around Bartine's neck witnessed by several people, but Bierce's stories are indeed marked by this sense of psychological ambiguity.

"A Baby Tramp:" Death and the Persistence of Identity

If "The Boarded Window" Presents death as a liminal state and "John Bartine's Watch" depicts its effects as transcending time, "A Baby Tramp" explores the persistence of emotional and spiritual connections beyond physical death. The story begins with a series of strange events

affecting the town of Blackburg, including a mysterious epidemic that claims numerous lives. Among the dead are Hetty Parlow, her husband, and the remaining members of the Brownon family. Their deaths leave Hetty's toddler son orphaned and separated from his home. Relatives of his father take him away to Nevada, far from Blackburg and the grave of his mother. Yet despite his age and the impossibility of the journey, Joey repeatedly abandons those who try to care for him and continues traveling towards his former home. When questioned by a policeman once as to where he is going, he replies, "a doin' home." He reaches Blackburg eventually, and is found lying dead on his mother's grave.

In the story's most significant supernatural event, several witnesses see the ghost of Hetty Parlow calling Joey's name near the cemetery. The appearance of the ghost creates a connection between the dead mother and her living child that continues despite death, and which tragically resolves through the child's subsequent death. Bierce writes, "They found him there the next morning, very wet, very cold, but no longer hungry. It was observed… that the little fellow was lying upon the grave of Hetty Parlow." Here, Bierce imagines a reality in which maternal attachment remains after the mother's physical body is gone. The ghostly appearance and Joey's inexplicable pull towards it serve as the story's ontological proof that emotional bonds may survive bodily death.

Wolf's concept of alternative ontologies fits here equally well. The story takes place in a recognizable American setting, which realistically handles issues of inheritance and family separation. Nevertheless, Bierce overlays this familiar world with the suggestion that the dead still have agency and power. Hetty Parlow's appearance and Joey's seemingly impossible journey imply that forces beyond ordinary material ones continue to shape events. The resulting world is one in which death allows identity to persist in an altered form. However, the ontological imagination here exists to subtly present another idea. As Wolf explains,

History, geography, culture, language, and even ontology can all be designed to reflect ideas systems, and beliefs about which the author wishes to make a point… If the author can present a world as a coherent whole… the audience may be more receptive to the ideas being presented than they would be if the same ideas were stated directly in a more heavy-handed way. (p. 193)

In "A Baby Tramp," Bierce employs the persistence of emotional bonds beyond death to foreground the reality that disasters and worldly events of various degrees affect the innocent with the same, or rather worse cruelty than they do everyone else. The beginning paragraph of the story states it thus. "It was apparently an ordinary autumn rainstorm, but the

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water which fell upon Jo, (who was hardly old enough to be either just or unjust, and so perhaps did not come under the law of impartial distribution) appeared to have some property peculiar to itself. One would have said it was dark and adhesive—sticky." In this manner, the story is a commentary on the state of reality. By imagining a world in which maternal attachment survives death, Bierce highlights the vulnerability of innocent lives to forces beyond their understanding or control. As Lily Alexander notes, "Wonderworlds are created to underscore trouble within Homeworlds, and to explore their symbolic loss of balance… Drama evolved as a mechanism of early warning system, reacting to a looming social discord with the goal of finding a solution before it's too late." (p. 26). Although "A Baby Tramp" is certainly not separated enough from the real world to be classified as a 'wonderworld,' Bierce indeed has employed the events in it as a tragic depiction of the state of the real world.

Mendlesohn's concept of intrusion fantasy also applies equally well. The supernatural enters an otherwise realistic narrative through the appearance of Hetty's ghost and through Joey's inexplicable determination to return home. Neither event receives a rational explanation. As Mendlesohn explains, "The intrusion fantasy uses the form of the club story the unquestioned tale to construct consensus reality, then renders the walls of the world story translucent… the intrusion fantasy requires faith in the subsurface, the sense that there is always something lurking." (p. 116). Therefore, the fantastic gradually becomes the most plausible way to interpret events that otherwise defy understanding. The forces at work lurk in the subsurface of the world, never revealing themselves entirely, but shaping events. In this way, the intrusion of the supernatural depicts a reflection about the ongoing bond between the living and the dead in a story that ordinarily would be about loss and grief.

Through Joey's journey and Hetty Parlow's ghost, Bierce shows death as incapable of fully erasing identity and love. The story suggests that personal connections may last beyond physical death and continue to exert influence upon the living. In this way, "A Baby Tramp" supports Bierce's larger ontological view by portraying death as a condition through which emotional and spiritual continuity remains possible.

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Conclusion

Ambrose Bierce's short stories depict the idea that death may be impermanent. He uses supernatural elements and fantastic intrusions into recognizable realities as narrative devices, creating alternative ontologies that destabilize the accepted understanding of death, thereby constructing it as liminal and persistent.

Each of the stories analyzed approaches this uncertainty from a different perspective. In "The Boarded Window," death is a liminal state the boundaries of which cannot be clearly identified. In "John Bartine's Watch," death transcends temporal limits, causing the consequences of a past execution to affect future generations. In "A Baby Tramp," death fails to erase emotional bonds as the link between mother and child persists even after the mother's life ends. Together, these narratives portray death to be a phenomenon with a contested meaning.

By imagining realities in which consciousness, memory, causality and emotion continue to exist beyond death, Bierce encourages readers to reconsider the permanence that is associated with mortality. Towards these ends, the fantastic elements in these stories explore possibilities which lie beyond empirical certainty. Bierce therefore presents death as a threshold the nature of which remains ambiguous.

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