

Ambrose Bierce

(Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce)

June 24, 1842 (Meigs, OH) – c. 1914 (Chihuahua, Mexico)

AMBROSE BIERCE, KNOWN AS ‘Bitter Bierce’ because of his biting cynicism, left home at the age of fifteen to work as a printer’s apprentice for an Ohio newspaper. He would eventually rise to prominence as one of America’s best-known literary figures.

However, before he became famous, he would fight for the Union at the Battle of Shiloh, be wounded at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, and take part in other military actions.

Twenty years later, he would write about the time when America was at war with itself, reflecting heavily on his personal experiences. The venue was a weekly newspaper column, and if you happen to be looking for a boots-on-the-ground account of the Civil War, his *What I Saw of Shiloh* is an excellent place to start.¹

With his brilliant mind and blisteringly descriptive pen, he wrote about the small stuff, things that might seem trivial to historians who are mostly interested in the big picture.

For instance, Bierce writes of being present during the first bloody day at Shiloh when he came across a steamer carrying reinforcements, many of whom would be dead by day’s end.

He remembered being surprised by the sight of a woman:

She was a fine creature, this woman; somebody’s wife. ... She stood on the upper deck with the red blaze of battle bathing her beautiful face, the twinkle of a thousand rifles mirrored in her eyes; and displaying a small ivory-handled pistol [that told me] if it came to the worst, she would do her duty like a man! I am proud to remember that I took off my hat to this little fool.²

Bierce, well known and respected, continued his newspaper columns until 1906.

He also frequently contributed to America’s periodicals and authored numerous short stories, poetry, and fiction. However,

it is for one thing that most people associate his name these days, his *Devil's Dictionary*.³

In 1906, Bierce's downright devilishly delightful definitions were bound and published under the title *The Cynic's Word Book*, a title he despised but didn't have the power to disapprove. That's because the publisher refused – on religious grounds – to use the word “Devil” in the book title.

What follows are a few of the entries, still astonishingly on target and curiously relevant, in what is published these days under his preferred title, the *Devil's Dictionary*.

Adam's Apple: A protuberance on the throat of a man, thoughtfully provided by nature to keep the rope in place.

Admiration: Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

Anoint: To grease a king or other functionary already sufficiently slippery.

Beauty: The power by which a woman charms a lover and terrifies a husband.

Bore: A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

Christian: One who believes the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor.

Curiosity: An objectionable quality of the female mind.

Diagnosis: A physician's forecast of a disease by the patient's pulse and purse.

Egotist: A person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.

Homicide: The slaying of one human by another. There are four kinds of homicides: felonious, excusable, justifiable, and praiseworthy.

Lawyer: One skilled in circumvention of the law.

Love: Temporary insanity curable by marriage.

Marriage: The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making in all, two.

Zeal: A certain nervous disorder afflicting the young and inexperienced.

In 1913, at the age of seventy-one, Bierce undertook an extended trip, first through his old Civil War battlefields, then through Louisiana and Texas and into Mexico, which, at the time, was in the throes of a Civil War of its own.

In Mexico, he joined Pancho Villa's army as an observer and accompanied him to the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

To his niece Lora he wrote, with typical Bierceanian humor:

If you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags, please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs.

Bierce's last letter to his niece was postmarked Chihuahua, Mexico, December 26, 1913.

His fate has never been determined.

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1. Bierce, Ambrose, *What I Saw at Shiloh*. First published in 1881 and again in 1909. 80 pages. Many internet reprints available from various sources.
 2. Ambrose Bierce Project. "Works by Ambrose Bierce," *What I saw of Shiloh*. First published: 1881.
<http://ambrosebierce.org/shiloh.htm>
 3. Bierce, Ambrose, *The Cynic's Word Book*. Arthur F. Bird, Publisher, 1906. The book was republished in a complete version with a title change to *The Devil's Dictionary* in 1911. *The Devil's Dictionary* is widely reprinted and available on the internet and wherever books are sold.

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*Cabbage: a familiar kitchen-garden vegetable
about as large and as wise as a man's head.*

Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914) author, journalist