

They Are Legend:
The Popular American Gothic of Ambrose Bierce and Richard Matheson

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet

Ambrose Bierce and Richard Matheson may seem like an odd pairing at first. Not only were they born nearly a century apart (Bierce in 1842 and Matheson in 1926), but they have ended up falling on different sides of the high–low literature divide. Bierce has been honored with a Library of America volume, consolidating his place in the American canon, while Matheson is best known for his television and film scripts and enjoys a cult following of industry fans. In his lifetime, Bierce was famous for his cynicism and misanthropic wit – with monikers like “Bitter Bierce” and “The Wickedest Man in San Francisco” – while Matheson’s protégés speak of his “great heart” and “SOUL” (Wiater, Bradley, and Stuve 2009: 106, 109, capitals in original). Yet underneath these differences of literary status and personality lie important affinities. Both have contributed incalculably to the broadening as well as the deepening of American Gothic fiction. Each worked in the most popular and widely accessible communication media of his time, newspapers in Bierce’s case, television and film in Matheson’s. While neither name is necessarily familiar to what Bierce would call “that immortal ass, the average man,” both are legendary among other writers as well as serious readers of the Gothic, fantastic, fantasy, and science fiction (Bierce 1911a: 67). Bierce’s influence begins with Matheson himself, who read Bierce as a child and credits him as a formative influence on the darkness of his work: “My early stories were so grim because all the stories I had read growing up were by Ambrose Bierce and Bram Stoker . . . I just transferred that darkness into my science fiction” (Matheson 2003: 123). Matheson, in turn, has been cited by Stephen King, Anne Rice, and Harlan Ellison for inspiring their love of horror fiction.¹ More importantly, besides popularizing American Gothic and extending its influence, both Bierce and Matheson developed the genre as a means to think about subjectivity, epistemology, and human nature with inventive, subtly satirical, and ethically complex narratives that continue to haunt and delight readers. With Bierce and Matheson, the American Gothic expanded its speculative function, initiated by Charles Brockden Brown, demonstrating its genius for experimentation and the thinking through of technological and psychological possibilities, serving as a true laboratory of the imagination.

It is customary to begin any discussion of Bierce with a comment about his mysterious death (he disappeared in Mexico in 1913) and unhappy existence. He suffered lifelong health problems from the Civil War, outlived two sons, and separated from a beloved wife because of a perceived infidelity. Biographically, there is little to compare with Richard Matheson’s long and happy life, enduring marriage, and four loving children (three of whom have followed in his footsteps as writers). Perhaps the presence of an ardently religious parent could be cited as a common denominator, pushing both men into the arms of skepticism and irreverent speculation. However, the far more vital common ground between them, I would like to propose, is a formative experience of war and combat. This is not to peddle the familiar cliché that war trauma translated into a lifetime of writing about terror, though every cliché has its kernel of truth. Instead, each

man was affected in complex and profound ways both by his personal experience of military service and by the national experience of modern warfare.

Bierce enlisted at a time when young men thought the war would be over in three months, and served with distinction for four years, participating in some of the war's fiercest battles, including Shiloh and Chickamauga, and suffering a head injury that bothered him for the rest of his life. Many critics use the war to explain Bierce's ferocious cynicism, but the causes of Bierce's disillusionment with the war and with his country lie as much with the corrupt postbellum period as with the Civil War itself. Bierce's stories reveal a writer of great conscience and humanity who could admire military service and self-sacrifice if it served a greater purpose; he was not strictly speaking a pacifist. It was rather the errors of officers and the pointless waste of lives in many cases, as well as the failures of the Reconstruction era – the virtual reenslavement of the black population and the crass exploitation of the South by the North and of the poor by wealthy elites – that combined to shape Bierce's final savage assessment of the war (Berkove 2002: 35).

Richard Matheson emerged from his World War II infantry experience relatively unscathed, with no physical injuries and seemingly nothing that overtly suggested emotional trauma. The greater cultural coherence of the so-called antifascist war probably had much to do with that. Although World War II was as brutal as any war, it was generally depicted (and understood) during and after as a worthwhile effort that made sense in a larger national narrative. In contrast, the meaning of the Civil War was far more contested and ultimately elusive for many Americans, including Bierce. However, what does seem to have considerably marked Matheson and his creative imagination is the development and dropping of the atom bombs in 1945. Much of his early work is concerned with apocalyptic scenarios, such as "Third from the Sun" (1950), "Advance Notice" (1952), "The Last Day" (1953), and the well-known *I Am Legend* (1954). Even *The Shrinking Man* (1956) is clearly a product of the atomic age, with the main character starting to shrink after exposure to a strange fog, reminiscent of the radioactive mist that killed fishermen around the Bikini Islands in 1954. The story is not apocalyptic in the conventional sense, since only one man is affected, but the result for him can certainly be called apocalyptic, as he shrinks to infinitesimal size. Nevertheless, surprisingly, the novel ends on a hopeful note: the possibility that the tiny hero will continue to matter in the universe no matter how small he becomes.

Matheson's willingness to question conventional values, as this ending does, permitted him to create the even more startling and powerful ending of the far more explicitly apocalyptic *I Am Legend*. This novel, adapted for film three times, is credited with updating the American Gothic to a modern urban environment. Sara Wasson's book *Urban Gothic of the Second World War* (2010) helps us understand Matheson's portrait of Los Angeles as post-apocalyptic wasteland in the larger context of the "the imperial metropolis made suddenly uncanny, primitive and hostile" as the "iconic locus of dread" of World War II (11). The background is a nuclear catastrophe that has changed the climate and triggered the propagation of a virus that turned the world population into vampires, except for one man with an immunity contracted by exposure to a vampire bat while in the army. The actual cause of the holocaust is not the focus so much as the psychological and moral implications of being the last man alive on earth, who, as it happens, in the words of the poster for *The Omega Man*, is "not alone." In spite of the

popularity of this novel with Hollywood, none of the adaptations has respected Matheson's brilliant and quintessentially Gothic ending: the reversal of man and monster. In the last moment of the novel, captured by the infected mutants he has been killing for years, and awaiting execution, Robert Neville realizes that it is he who has become the bogeyman for the new society they are constructing. He is "legend," in the sense that he is the creature that inspires the new population with terror as he hunts them while they sleep.

This reversal harkens back to the ethical core of the Gothic dilemma and the specificity of Gothic reading pleasure, that of testing social norms and values with extraordinary circumstances.² Like Frankenstein's monster, the infected Ruth is allowed to voice the perspective of the vampires and persuade Neville (and perhaps the reader) that monstrosity is sometimes mainly a matter of point of view and numbers. She also comes to warn him of his impending capture and later execution, proving through her loyalty and compassion that she is fully his equal in moral terms. Matheson's ability to imagine a 180-degree reversal of values in a binary as fundamental as man and monster at the height of the Cold War reveals both a secret truth lurking in the heart of Cold War logic (namely, that mirror opposites are nevertheless mirrors of each other) and that the American Gothic has always had a strong strain of oppositional logic in it, no matter how removed it may seem from historical reality. This has been the focus of Gothic criticism in recent years, and especially of American Gothic criticism, which arose in the 1980s with the purpose of using the Gothic to expose the fractures in American history and ideology.³

Nowhere is that oppositional spirit more fierce or more terrible than in Ambrose Bierce's war writings. As Charles Crow notes in *American Gothic*, "it is difficult to draw the line" between Bierce's war stories and his horror fiction, because "the glory of war was for him illusion, and nightmare its reality" (2009: 98). In all fairness, however, it must be added that not all his war tales were antiwar, and many of them found redeeming elements in the instances of loyalty, conscience, and humanity that the war could offer.⁴ Nevertheless, no one has written a more scathing and unforgettable indictment of war than Bierce created with "Chickamauga" (1889), a story all the more terrible for being told through the point of view of a six-year-old child. The plot is quite simple: while playing at being a soldier the boy wanders away from home, falls asleep in the woods, and wakes up to find the wounded survivors of a real battle crawling and dragging themselves past him. Too young to understand what he is seeing, he tries to play with them, only to be shaken off. The story ends with the child's horrified discovery that his own home and his own mother have been destroyed. We also learn that the child is a deaf-mute, which makes his infantile militarism all the more ironic. The child cannot speak a word but has managed to absorb the "warrior-fire" cultivated by his otherwise peaceful farmer father and imagines warfare as a glorious game and noble birthright (Bierce 1909: 46). The dehumanizing consequences of war, evoked by Bierce through descriptions of the soldiers as "crawling figures" and unnatural beasts, missing arms, legs, jaws, or entire faces, is emphasized through the estranging technique of a child's vision. What at first seems a "merry spectacle" to his uncomprehending eyes is actually a "haunted landscape" of dead and dying men (53). Initially delighted with the sight of the burning plantation, he is horrified when the vision reverses itself, and "his little world swung half around," and he realizes the pleasing blaze is his own burning home. The boy

is transformed from the proud scion of a warrior line to an inarticulate wreck making a “startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil” (57). This is the work of war, Bierce tells us, and the child’s inability to grasp its full meaning lays that burden all the more effectively on the reader.

Richard Matheson’s “Witch War” (1951) also relies on the grotesque juxtaposition of childish innocence and war horror. The story is pure fantasy, a futuristic military unit consisting of seven little girls with great telepathic powers. When they are told to attack, they merely concentrate their minds for “the game” and unleash horrific destruction on the bodies of the approaching troops. Some men burst into flames, others are crushed by giant boulders, others drowned in a tidal wave, still others ripped apart by ferocious magical animals. The girls are moral innocents, like the child of Bierce’s story, taking pleasure in their deadly game, playing at murder from far away, the men they destroy no more real than characters in a story. This is warfare of the atomic age, mass death dropped from a passing plane or delivered by a long-range missile, a blip on a screen. Human bodies are destroyed by massive and impersonal weapons deployed on an inhuman scale, and after the attack, the seven little girls “all went downstairs and had breakfast” (Matheson 2003: 114). With this last line, Matheson captures the essence of television warfare, where the killing takes place far away, and at any moment the television can be turned off and domestic routines innocently resumed.

After their military service, Bierce and Matheson both found themselves pursuing writing careers during periods of postwar growth and economic expansion: the massive industrialization of the late nineteenth century in Bierce’s case and the shift from industry to late capitalism in Matheson’s. Both worked in the medium that had the widest distribution and mass public at the time: newspapers and television, respectively, and both managed to make a living from their writing. Bierce’s career owed much to William Randolph Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner*, which acquired Bierce early on and kept him in spite of political differences between the two men, most notably about the Spanish–American War (which Hearst supported and Bierce denounced). The *Examiner* served as a forum for many of Bierce’s stories, especially during the time of his most creative and important literary output during the late 1880s and early 1890s, when he wrote most of the war stories and fantastic tales that would be collected into two volumes: *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1892) and *Can Such Things Be?* (1893). Newspapers also carried Bierce’s cynically satirical definitions, a series that he published over a period of twenty-five years and which is now known as *The Devil’s Dictionary*. These cynical but often canny aphorisms are still quoted by journalists and writers today.

Richard Matheson also began in the print media, first writing for fantasy magazines and later selling stories to *Playboy* and other journals. However, his greatest impact has been on the medium that defined the post-World War II era: television. He wrote fourteen scripts for *The Twilight Zone*, one of the best *Star Trek* episodes (where Captain Kirk is split into two halves, one good and one evil), and several television film scripts, including *The Night Stalker* and *Duel* (which would become Steven Spielberg’s first important film). Matheson also worked extensively in cinema, collaborating with Roger Corman on adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories, and writing the screenplay for the film version of his *The Shrinking Man*. Matheson is probably most famous for *I Am Legend*, especially through the film adaptations, but the book and film adaptation of *Hell House* (1971 and 1973, respectively) are also well known, as are two more films, *Trilogy of Terror* (1975)

and *Trilogy of Terror II* (1996), both based on his short stories. Although writing generally in the vein of Gothic and fantasy, both Bierce and Matheson created a remarkably diverse oeuvre. Bierce's stories include invisible monsters, time travel, hypnotism, haunting, subjective distortions of time, and demonic specters, while Matheson's range from black magic and ghost spaceships to murderous dolls, mind control, holes into other dimensions, and suicidal robots. Both wrote at least one haunted house story, though Matheson's *Hell House* is a full novel while Bierce's is only a short tale. Both also lived on the West Coast and occasionally wrote Western fiction, including several well-received novels in Matheson's case. Running through the work of both men, however, a clear theme emerges: that of human, and often specifically male, fallibility. As if to refute the American myth of individual self-mastery and imperial masculinity, Bierce and Matheson offered fables of failure and limitation. In Bierce's case, the focus is generally on epistemology and perception, while in Matheson's it is masculine agency and social status more generally. In *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* (1984), Cathy N. Davidson argues that "Bierce structures nearly all his stories around breakdowns in perception and communication" (2). She contends that Bierce's work is concerned with the tendency of the human mind to fictionalize and distort, and that the larger thrust of this project was to "disrupt the complacencies of the Gilded Age" (3). To this end, Bierce attacks the supposed self-transparency of the modern subject, demonstrating the many ways in which the mind selects, shapes, and distorts knowledge according to one's interests and fears. Language is the first and most basic filter through which knowledge must pass, and so Bierce's work is often concerned with the subtle deviousness of language.

The senses constitute another fallible filter, and Bierce's story "The Damned Thing" imagines a creature covered by a color that the human eye does not perceive. This story, told in multiple perspectives (and with considerable black humor), anticipates Lovecraft's work as well as the *Predator* films, pitting bewildered humans against an invisible predator in a typical Western landscape. In another story, "The Realm of the Unreal," the narrator discovers that he has been hypnotized for several weeks by a man he took for a charlatan. The story ends with the assertion that a skilled hypnotist may keep a particularly sensitive subject in a trance for years, "dominated by whatever delusions and hallucinations the operator may from time to time suggest" (Bierce 1910: 267). This story represents a kind of extreme example of how fallible the human senses are, and all the more disturbing since they allow for malicious manipulation by another person. Finally, Bierce's most famous and, according to some critics, most perfectly realized short story brings these themes together into a portrait of self-deception so elaborate that it even deceives the reader: "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890). In this three-part tale that begins with the planned execution of a Confederate spy, we are led to believe, as does the condemned man, that he has escaped by falling in the water and swimming downstream, arriving finally at his plantation home, only to be pulled up short (literally, in the protagonist's case) at the end as we realize that the story has been an elaborate wish-fulfillment fantasized in the dilated last moments of his life.

If Bierce's American Gothic whittles away at the epistemological premises of late nineteenth-century self-complacency, Matheson's work reflects the shrinking sense of agency and community in the second half of the twentieth. Matheson himself sums up the "leitmotif" of his work as: "*The individual isolated in a threatening world, attempting to*

survive" (2003: 7, emphasis in original). Matheson's protagonists, almost always men, find themselves fighting for their lives against inexplicably malicious forces in an indifferent universe. No story illustrates this as succinctly as *I Am Legend*, which depicts a lone man's struggle against his suburban neighbors who are now vampires, dwindling food supplies, and his own crippling sense of loneliness and despair. Loneliness and survival are themes already present in Matheson's very first published story, "Born of Man and Woman" (1951), which is told from the point of view of a monster child locked away in a normal couple's basement. Another early story, "Disappearing Act" (1953), is narrated by a man whose life begins to disappear, one person at a time, until he himself vanishes from a diner one day, leaving his journal behind, cut off in midsentence. The cult film *Duel* pits a lone man against a hostile sixteen-wheel truck which races, intimidates, and tries to run him off the road. With minimal dialogue and almost no other characters, *Duel* strips the man versus hostile world story down to its basics, even giving the main character the name "David Mann" to emphasize his representative status.

The implicit masculinity of the name "Mann" brings me to the question of gender in Bierce and Matheson, since their focus on male heroes is both striking and typical of popular American Gothic. Whereas Gothic literature has been a refuge for women writers and female protagonists, the more popular strain of the American Gothic has had a more androcentric bias. For starters, the victim-heroes tend overwhelmingly to be men. The threatening forces are also often male or even patriarchal. For example, in the two haunted house stories, *Hell House* and Bierce's "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot" (1891), the main villains are murderous father figures. More disturbingly, however, the popular Gothic has also been a site for paranoid male fantasies of a threatening femininity. Bierce's definition of "woman" from *The Devil's Dictionary* is revealing: "the most widely distributed of all beasts of prey, infesting all habitable parts of the globe" (Bierce 1911c: 367). Accordingly, in his most widely anthologized story, "The Death of Halpin Frayser" (1893), the main character is murdered by the ghost of his mother, or possibly a demon specter impersonating his mother, or his own nightmare vision of his mother conjured in a dream. Whatever the exact circumstances may be, it is some phantom version of his own too cloyingly attached and sexually ambiguous mother that kills Halpin Frayser (unless it is his mad stepfather, a possibility mentioned by the detectives, but not figuring in Frayser's dream).

Similarly, in Matheson's *The Shrinking Man*, the wife becomes increasingly gigantesque and inadvertently dangerous as the hero shrinks first to child size and then to doll size and smaller. It is also no accident that the spider he battles at the end of the novel is a black widow, that most emblematically female of natural predators. Historian Kyle Cuordileone, in her influential study of Cold War masculinity, has characterized the film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* as an allegory of the postwar American man's "powerlessness and emasculation" (2005: 135). The sole female character in *I Am Legend* plays a similarly nefarious role, as an infected mutant who lies to Robert in order to spy on him. Until the end, his entire relationship to her is characterized by (ultimately justified) suspiciousness and barely veiled aggression. One of Matheson's few stories to focus entirely on a woman, "Prey," depicts a ferocious battle between Amelia and the murderous African warrior spirit that possesses a small sculpture she has bought for a new boyfriend. The story ends with her own possession by the spirit of "He Who Kills," who takes over her body and transforms *her* into a predator lying in wait for her next

victim (first her own mother, then probably new boyfriend). In short, the popular American Gothic has played an ambivalent role in relation to representations of women, and the work of Bierce and Matheson offers few exceptions.

Another shared theme is the conceit of man hunting man. It is also the theme that links their interest in the Western to their work in the American Gothic, and grounds both in their early experience of war. I would argue that it was that formative exposure to legalized murder that is combat that fed both writers' vision of civilization as a fragile camouflage for a much darker human nature. In Bierce's case, this earned him an enduring reputation as a cynic. Yet, he would have countered by saying that a cynic is merely more lucid than your average man, as he defines the term in *The Devil's Dictionary*: "A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be" (Bierce 1911c: 367). Matheson shares a surprisingly bleak view of human nature at times, and it is telling that one of his most recent novels, *Hunted Past Reason* (2002), is a *Deliverance*-inspired story of a man raping and then hunting another man on what was supposed to be a friendly three-day hike together. If *Hunted Past Reason* has not been well received by readers and critics, its crude violence has been cited most often in Internet reviews as a reason. It seems that after an extended foray into spiritualism and love stories (e.g., *Bid Time Return*, *What Dreams May Come*, *The Path: A New Look at Reality*), the master of horror has had trouble finding his way back into the dark and has taken a shortcut through his earliest experience of fear, i.e., war. Although the novel is about a weekend outing gone wrong, combat is the original model for the vicious manhunt it turns into. Early in the novel, after the more experienced outdoorsman and soon-to-be man-hunter displays the many weapons, including a machete, he has packed for the trip, the friend asks: "Are we going for a hike or a war?" The answer is "Never know" (Matheson 2002). For the war veteran, the difference between the front and the home-front is never as absolute as it should be, and the frontier, as an uncanny border space between civilization and savagery, is never far away.

Bierce also returned to his formative war experience later in his life. His journey into Mexico during the Mexican Revolution has puzzled biographers. Fifteen years earlier he wanted nothing to do with the fighting in Cuba during the Spanish–American War. Now he settled various affairs and seemed to prepare for a trip from which he would not return. He wrote to a friend: "Good-bye – if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think it is a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico – ah, that is euthanasia!" (Morris 1995: 249). In another letter, he said he was going because "the fighting in Mexico interests me ... I want to go down and see if these Mexicans shoot straight" (248). While some biographers have taken Bierce at his word, accepting that he was merely curious about the war in Mexico, it is also reasonable, based on the first quote, to suppose that Bierce journeyed into Mexico in 1913 expecting or hoping to end up dead. Self-euthanasia ... by means of war. Like many combat veterans, Bierce suffered from survival guilt and an uncanny sense of postmortem existence. In one story, "The Major's Tale," the narrator interrupts a comic tale to describe himself as "one of the horrors of war strayed from his era to yours" and as a "skeleton ... with rattling fingers and bobbing skull" (Bierce 1911b: 43). This passage has often been quoted and discussed because of its autobiographical elements and striking image of the narrator as a kind of ghost haunting the present.

Matheson was similarly fascinated with death and especially with the notion of an afterlife. One of his early stories, “Death Ship” (1953), is a space-age retelling of the Flying Dutchman legend, told from the point of view of three astronauts who think they have survived a crash only to realize with horror that they are dead and doomed to haunt the skies as ghosts. The protagonist of *I Am Legend* is also something of a ghost himself, numb and voided of human emotion from years of solitude. When confronted with another human being in distress, Neville cannot feel anything for her: “Emotion was a difficult thing to summon from the dead” (Matheson 1954: 131). In the 1970s, he departed from the horror genre entirely to explore the afterlife in two novels that were later adapted into films: *Bid Time Return* (1975) and *What Dreams May Come* (1978). Both could be described as spiritual love stories, where characters find themselves crossing the boundary of death and time to reunite with a beloved person. Surprisingly, even the misogynist and cynical Bierce wrote a similar story later in his life, “Beyond the Wall” (1907), where a proud and paranoid young man (not unlike Bierce himself) allows a beautiful girl who loves him to die without a response from him to her Morse code signal on the wall between their rooms. Later, when he is consumed by remorse for his cruelty and egotism, he realizes that she is contacting him from the afterlife by tapping their special code on the walls of his house. Like Matheson’s later work, Bierce’s story is not a conventional ghost story but a moving fantasy of love enduring after death.

In conclusion, Ambrose Bierce and Richard Matheson, though rarely discussed together, profit from the comparison. Both are legends of American Gothic literature, with a vast though often subterranean influence. Each contributed to the popularization of the American Gothic in the mass media but also to its development as a space of questioning and speculative investigation. I have argued that Bierce’s experiments with the limits of perception and Matheson’s tales of dwindling individual power reflect the larger cultural work of the American Gothic as a genre of opposition and satire. If the twentieth century has been a period of American industrial, imperial, and global hegemony, Bierce and Matheson have served as its gadflies and conscience, offering warnings, critiques, thought-experiments, and apocalyptic visions rooted in both men’s withering early experience of total war. The quotation about “that immortal ass, the average man,” evoked at the beginning of this chapter, continues by asserting that the average man “sees with nothing but his eyes” (Bierce 1911a: 67). To correct this limitation, both Bierce and Matheson have fashioned the American Gothic into a penetrating and prophetic instrument, where readers are invited to see with their keenest minds and unsealed imaginations.

<xrefs>CROSS-REFERENCES

SEE ALSO: CHAPTER 25 (“IDENTICAL BOXES SPREADING LIKE GANGRENE”: DEFINING THE SUBURBAN GOTHIC), CHAPTER 26 (THE COLD WAR GOTHIC POETRY OF SYLVIA PLATH), CHAPTER 27 (SEXUALITY AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN VAMPIRE), CHAPTER 35 (APOCALYPTIC GOTHIC).

<hx>Notes

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<hx>Further Reading

- <ref>**Bierce**, A. (1964). *Gothic and Horror Stories of Ambrose Bierce*. New York: Dover. A good anthology, beginning with the rightfully canonized "The Death of Halpin Frayser," of Bierce's more "Gothic" stories.

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<notes>¹ Harlan Ellison is quoted on the back cover of Matheson (2003), while Stephen King told *The New Yorker* that Matheson was one of the "people who taught me the most about being a novelist" (quoted in Bradley 2010: 4). Anne Rice credits Matheson's influence in an *Entertainment Weekly* interview (August 7, 2009), which is referenced in the Wikipedia article on Matheson (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Matheson; accessed May 5, 2013). Still other horror and Gothic fiction writers pay tribute to Matheson's influence in Wiater, Bradley, and Stuve (2009).

² For a fuller presentation of the ethical dimension of the American Gothic, see Soltysik Monnet (2010: 2–3).

³ Critical interest in the use of American Gothic as a means to explore ideological fractures in American historical narratives began with Gross (1989) and Goddu (1997). For a more complete history of the emergence of American Gothic criticism, see Soltysik Monnet (2005).

⁴ According to one biographer, many of Bierce's stories are concerned with heroism as well as fear (Berkove 2002: 37). According to another, one of Bierce's stories was credited by Theodore Roosevelt as inspiration for his charge up San Juan Hill in the Spanish–American War of 1898 (Watson 2011, location 189/256).