

Name: _____

Class: _____

“A Horseman in the Sky”

By Ambrose Bierce

1889

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce (1842 – c. 1914) was an American journalist, satirist, and short story writer. In this short story set during the American Civil War, a young Virginian man joins the Union Army and falls asleep on one of his watches. When he awakes, he faces a difficult duty. As you read, take notes on Bierce’s representation of the Civil War and any instances of symbolism, irony, and foreshadowing.

- [1] One sunny afternoon in the autumn of the year 1861 a soldier lay in a clump of laurel¹ by the side of a road in western Virginia. He lay at full length upon his stomach, his feet resting upon the toes, his head upon the left forearm. His extended right hand loosely grasped his rifle. But for the somewhat methodical disposition of his limbs and a slight rhythmic movement of the cartridge-box at the back of his belt, he might have been thought to be dead. He was asleep at his post of duty. But if detected he would be dead shortly afterward, death being the just and legal penalty of his crime.²



“General Lee and Traveller” by Bob Travis is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

The clump of laurel in which the criminal lay was in the angle of a road which after ascending southward a steep acclivity to that point turned sharply to the west, running along the summit for perhaps one hundred yards. There it turned southward again and went zigzagging downward through the forest. At the salient³ of that second angle was a large flat rock, jutting out northward, overlooking the deep valley from which the road ascended. The rock capped a high cliff; a stone dropped from its outer edge would have fallen sheer downward one thousand feet to the tops of the pines. The angle where the soldier lay was on another spur of the same cliff. Had he been awake he would have commanded a view, not only

¹ Most likely a reference to “mountain laurel,” a North American evergreen shrub or small tree that resembles the Mediterranean laurel, a foliage used in crowns and trophies (particularly in ancient Greek and Roman cultures).

² Falling asleep while on military post is considered to be a “dereliction of duty,” a specific offense under United States Code Title 10,892. Article 92. Nowadays death is no longer a punishment for this crime; today’s consequences can include dishonorable discharge, reduction of pay, or confinement.

³ In this context, “salient” refers to something that projects outward or upward from its surroundings.

of the short arm of the road and the jutting rock, but of the entire profile of the cliff below it. It might well have made him giddy to look.

The country was wooded everywhere except at the bottom of the valley to the northward, where there was a small natural meadow, through which flowed a stream scarcely visible from the valley's rim. This open ground looked hardly larger than an ordinary door-yard, but was really several acres in extent. Its green was more vivid than that of the enclosing forest. Away beyond it rose a line of giant cliffs similar to those upon which we are supposed to stand in our survey of the savage scene, and through which the road had somehow made its climb to the summit. The configuration of the valley, indeed, was such that from our point of observation it seemed entirely shut in, and one could but have wondered how the road which found a way out of it had found a way into it, and whence came and whither went the waters of the stream that parted the meadow more than a thousand feet below.

No country is so wild and difficult but men will make it a theatre of war; concealed in the forest at the bottom of that military rat-trap, in which half a hundred men in possession of the exits might have starved an army to submission, lay five regiments of Federal infantry. They had marched all the previous day and night and were resting. At nightfall they would take to the road again, climb to the place where their unfaithful sentinel now slept, and descending the other slope of the ridge fall upon a camp of the enemy at about midnight. Their hope was to surprise it, for the road led to the rear of it. In case of failure, their position would be perilous in the extreme; and fall they surely would should accident or vigilance apprise the enemy of the movement.

- [5] The sleeping sentinel in the clump of laurel was a young Virginian named Carter Druse. He was the son of wealthy parents, an only child, and had known such ease and cultivation and high living as wealth and taste were able to command in the mountain country of western Virginia. His home was but a few miles from where he now lay. One morning he had risen from the breakfast-table and said, quietly but gravely: 'Father, a Union⁴ regiment has arrived at Grafton. I am going to join it.'

The father lifted his leonine⁵ head, looked at the son a moment in silence, and replied: 'Go, Carter, and whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty. Virginia, to which you are a traitor, must get on without you. Should we both live to the end of the war, we will speak further of the matter. Your mother, as the physician has informed you, is in a most critical condition; at the best she cannot be with us longer than a few weeks, but that time is precious. It would be better not to disturb her.'

So Carter Druse, bowing reverently to his father, who returned the salute with a stately courtesy that masked a breaking heart, left the home of his childhood to go soldiering. By conscience and courage, by deeds of devotion and daring, he soon commended himself to his fellows and his officers; and it was to these qualities and to some knowledge of the country that he owed his selection for his present perilous duty at the extreme outpost. Nevertheless, fatigue had been stronger than resolution and he had fallen asleep. What good or bad angel came in a dream to rouse him from his state of crime, who shall say? Without a movement, without a sound, in the profound silence and the languor of the late afternoon, some invisible messenger of fate touched with unsealing finger the eyes of his consciousness—whispered into the ear of his spirit the mysterious awakening word which no human lips ever have spoken, no human memory ever has recalled. He quietly raised his forehead from his arm and looked between the masking stems of the laurels, instinctively closing his right hand about the stock of his rifle.

⁴ During the American Civil War, the Union was the term used to refer to the United States of America, and specifically to the national government and the 20 free northern states and five border slave states that supported it. The Union was opposed by 11 southern slave states that formed the Confederate States of America, or "the Confederacy."

⁵ **Leonine (adjective):** relating to, suggestive of, or resembling a lion



His first feeling was a keen artistic delight. On a colossal pedestal, the cliff, motionless at the extreme edge of the capping rock and sharply outlined against the sky, was an equestrian statue of impressive dignity. The figure of the man sat on the figure of the horse, straight and soldierly, but with the repose⁶ of a Grecian god carved in the marble which limits the suggestion of activity. The gray costume⁷ harmonized with its aerial background; the metal of accoutrement and caparison⁸ was softened and subdued by the shadow; the animal's skin had no points of high light. A carbine⁹ strikingly foreshortened lay across the pommel of the saddle, kept in place by the right hand grasping it at the 'grip;' the left hand, holding the bridle rein, was invisible. In silhouette against the sky the profile of the horse was cut with the sharpness of a cameo; it looked across the heights of air to the confronting cliffs beyond. The face of the rider, turned slightly away, showed only an outline of temple and beard; he was looking downward to the bottom of the valley. Magnified by its lift against the sky and by the soldier's testifying sense of the formidableness of a near enemy the group appeared of heroic, almost colossal, size.

For an instant Druse had a strange, half-defined feeling that he had slept to the end of the war and was looking upon a noble work of art reared upon that eminence to commemorate the deeds of an heroic past of which he had been an inglorious part. The feeling was dispelled by a slight movement of the group: the horse, without moving its feet, had drawn its body slightly backward from the verge; the man remained immobile as before. Broad awake and keenly alive to the significance of the situation, Druse now brought the butt of his rifle against his cheek by cautiously pushing the barrel forward through the bushes, cocked the piece, and glancing through the sights covered a vital spot of the horseman's breast. A touch upon the trigger and all would have been well with Carter Druse. At that instant the horseman turned his head and looked in the direction of his concealed foeman—seemed to look into his very face, into his eyes, into his brave, compassionate heart.

- [10] Is it then so terrible to kill an enemy in war—an enemy who has surprised a secret vital to the safety of one's self and comrades—an enemy more formidable for his knowledge than all his army for its numbers? Carter Druse grew pale; he shook in every limb, turned faint, and saw the statuesque group before him as black figures, rising, falling, moving unsteadily in arcs of circles in a fiery sky. His hand fell away from his weapon, his head slowly dropped until his face rested on the leaves in which he lay. This courageous gentleman and hardy soldier was near swooning from intensity of emotion.

It was not for long; in another moment his face was raised from earth, his hands resumed their places on the rifle, his forefinger sought the trigger; mind, heart, and eyes were clear, conscience and reason sound. He could not hope to capture that enemy; to alarm him would but send him dashing to his camp with his fatal news. The duty of the soldier was plain: the man must be shot dead from ambush—without warning, without a moment's spiritual preparation, with never so much as an unspoken prayer, he must be sent to his account. But no—there is a hope; he may have discovered nothing—perhaps he is but admiring the sublimity of the landscape. If permitted, he may turn and ride carelessly away in the direction whence he came. Surely it will be possible to judge at the instant of his withdrawing whether he knows. It may well be that his fixity of attention—Druse turned his head and looked through the deeps of air downward, as from the surface to the bottom of a translucent sea. He saw creeping across the green meadow a sinuous line of figures of men and horses—some foolish commander was permitting the soldiers of his escort to water their beasts in the open, in plain view from a dozen summits!

Druse withdrew his eyes from the valley and fixed them again upon the group of man and horse in the sky, and again it was through the sights of his rifle. But this time his aim was at the horse. In his memory,

⁶ **Repose (noun):** restfulness, tranquility

⁷ Confederate soldiers wore gray uniforms, while Union soldiers wore blue.

⁸ **Caparison (noun):** rich clothing or adornment

⁹ A carbine is a short-barreled lightweight firearm originally used by cavalry.



as if they were a divine mandate, rang the words of his father at their parting: ‘Whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty.’ He was calm now. His teeth were firmly but not rigidly closed; his nerves were as tranquil as a sleeping babe’s—not a tremor affected any muscle of his body; his breathing, until suspended in the act of taking aim, was regular and slow. Duty had conquered; the spirit had said to the body: ‘Peace, be still.’ He fired.

An officer of the Federal¹⁰ force, who in a spirit of adventure or in quest of knowledge had left the hidden bivouac¹¹ in the valley, and with aimless feet had made his way to the lower edge of a small open space near the foot of the cliff, was considering what he had to gain by pushing his exploration further. At a distance of a quarter-mile before him, but apparently at a stone’s throw, rose from its fringe of pines the gigantic face of rock, towering to so great a height above him that it made him giddy to look up to where its edge cut a sharp, rugged line against the sky. It presented a clean, vertical profile against a background of blue sky to a point half the way down, and of distant hills, hardly less blue, thence to the tops of the trees at its base. Lifting his eyes to the dizzy altitude of its summit the officer saw an astonishing sight—a man on horseback riding down into the valley through the air!

Straight upright sat the rider, in military fashion, with a firm seat in the saddle, a strong clutch upon the rein to hold his charger from too impetuous¹² a plunge. From his bare head his long hair streamed upward, waving like a plume. His hands were concealed in the cloud of the horse’s lifted mane. The animal’s body was as level as if every hoof-stroke encountered the resistant earth. Its motions were those of a wild gallop, but even as the officer looked they ceased, with all the legs thrown sharply forward as in the act of alighting from a leap. But this was a flight!

- [15] Filled with amazement and terror by this apparition of a horseman in the sky—half believing himself the chosen scribe of some new Apocalypse, the officer was overcome by the intensity of his emotions; his legs failed him and he fell. Almost at the same instant he heard a crashing sound in the trees—a sound that died without an echo, and all was still.

The officer rose to his feet, trembling. The familiar sensation of an abraded shin recalled his dazed faculties. Pulling himself together he ran rapidly obliquely¹³ away from the cliff to a point distant from its foot; thereabout he expected to find his man; and thereabout he naturally failed. In the fleeting instant of his vision his imagination had been so wrought upon by the apparent grace and ease and intention of the marvelous performance that it did not occur to him that the line of march of aerial cavalry is directly downward, and that he could find the objects of his search at the very foot of the cliff. A half-hour later he returned to camp.

This officer was a wise man; he knew better than to tell an incredible truth. He said nothing of what he had seen. But when the commander asked him if in his scout he had learned anything of advantage to the expedition he answered:

‘Yes, sir; there is no road leading down into this valley from the southward.’

The commander, knowing better, smiled.

¹⁰ **Federal (adjective):** of or pertaining to the central government (in this case, the Union)

¹¹ “Bivouac” is a temporary encampment.

¹² **Impetuous (adjective):** acting or done quickly and without thought or care

¹³ **Obliquely (adverb):** indirectly; diagonally



[20] After firing his shot, Private Carter Druse reloaded his rifle and resumed his watch. Ten minutes had hardly passed when a Federal sergeant crept cautiously to him on hands and knees. Druse neither turned his head nor looked at him, but lay without motion or sign of recognition.

‘Did you fire?’ the sergeant whispered.

‘Yes.’

‘At what?’

‘A horse. It was standing on yonder rock—pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. It went over the cliff.’

[25] The man’s face was white, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Having answered, he turned away his eyes and said no more. The sergeant did not understand.

‘See here, Druse,’ he said, after a moment’s silence, ‘it’s no use making a mystery. I order you to report. Was there anybody on the horse?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘My father.’

[30] The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. ‘Good God!’ he said.

Text-Dependent Questions:

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes a theme of the text? [RL.2]
- a. Duty must never come before family.
 - b. War has its own set of rules.
 - c. Sons must eventually take the place of their fathers.
 - d. Loyalty to the cause was above all other loyalties during the Civil War.

2. PART B: Cite a piece of evidence from the text that supports the answer to Part A. [RL.1]

3. How does Druse initially react to the horseman? [RL.3]
- a. Still drowsy, Druse mistakes the horseman for a grand statue.
 - b. Druse admires the striking figure of the man on the horse, just as he admired his father’s “leonine” form.
 - c. Druse immediately aims his rifle at the man, intending to perform his duty and shoot.
 - d. He is overcome with emotion upon seeing this intimidating figure, whom he must kill.

4. PART A: What does the term “eminence” *most closely* mean as used in paragraph 9? [RL.4]
- a. Brave audacity
 - b. Gentleness and quietude
 - c. Illumination or brightness
 - d. Renown and distinction

5. PART B: Which TWO details from paragraph 8 *best* support the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- a. “sharply outlined against the sky”
 - b. “impressive dignity”
 - c. “straight and soldierly”
 - d. “which limits the suggestion of activity”
 - e. “softened and subdued”
 - f. “looking downward”
 - g. “heroic, almost colossal size”

6. What purpose does the Federal officer’s point of view serve in the story? [RL.6]



7. Why does the author introduce Druse as lying in a “clump of laurel”? Consider any symbolic or cultural meanings associated with this plant, and what significance it lends to this particular story. [RL.5]

8. Reread paragraph 12. Which of the following *best* states how the author foreshadows the fact that the horseman is Druse’s father? [RL.3]
- a. By referring to the horseman and his horse as a “group,” suggesting that Druse feels a connection to the man
 - b. By having Druse aim at the horse instead of the man, suggesting that Druse could not bring himself to shoot his own father
 - c. By recalling Druse’s father’s words to him in that moment to “do what you conceive to be your duty,” suggesting that Druse is using this memory to justify the act of killing his father
 - d. By referencing “a sleeping babe,” bringing to mind family and parenthood and therefore hinting that the man is Druse’s father

Discussion Questions:

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The American Civil War is often described as brother fighting brother, but in this story Bierce depicts father fighting son. What significance or effect, if any, does this change have on the story and Bierce’s presentation of the Civil War?
2. In the context of this passage, how are we changed by war? Consider the war-time logic and rules featured in the story and how they might contradict peace-time morality and law, as well as how this different set of rules changes a person. Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

For Teachers

Suggested Text Pairings:

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce (Short Story)

This short story also takes place during the American Civil War, in which a Confederate sympathizer is captured by Union soldiers. Pair “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” with “A Horseman in the Sky” and ask students to compare these two works by the same author. Do they share any similar themes or other literary devices? How does each work portray the Civil War? Find “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” at CommonLit.org (**Death → How do people face death? → 9th-10th Grade**).

“For Many Returning Vets, ‘Moral Injury’ Just as Difficult” from NPR (Interview)

For a veteran returning home from Afghanistan or Iraq, the mental trauma of having killed someone can be just as devastating as physical injury. The Department of Veteran Affairs has called this problem “moral injury,” but some veterans think this phrase minimizes the horror of killing. In 2013, Timothy Kudo, a former Marine captain, wrote an opinion piece for *The Washington Post* about grappling with moral injury. In this text, he shares his experience with NPR’s *Weekend Edition Sunday* host Rachel Martin. Pair “For Many Returning Vets, ‘Moral Injury’ Just as Difficult” with “A Horseman in the Sky” and ask students to discuss the psychological effects of war. Find “For Many Returning Vets, ‘Moral Injury’ Just as Difficult” at CommonLit.org (**War & Peace → How are we changed by war? → 9th-10th Grade**).

Answers to Text-Dependent Questions:

1. B
2. Answers will vary; students should provide sufficient evidence to support the answer to Part A.
3. A
4. D
5. B, G
6. Answers will vary; students might discuss how the change in perspective occurs just after Druse fires his gun and sends the horseman over the edge of the cliff. This invokes an emotional detachment, as well as a narrative one—as if Druse is distancing himself from the act he just committed (killing a man) and the trauma upon realizing he killed his father. Two, from his vantage point the officer has a different view of the fall; from his perspective it looks almost as if the horseman is taking flight on his steed, like something out of a myth. Like Druse mistaking him for a statue of a god, the Federal officer’s perspective lends a larger-than-life characterization of the horseman.
7. Answers will vary; students should note any symbolic significance of the laurel (incorporating their own knowledge and information provided in the footnotes), as well as what this symbolism means in context of Bierce’s story. Laurel is classically associated with victors, crowning those who have won a contest or conquered an enemy, so surrounding the protagonist of this story in laurel likewise sets him up as a hero. He is even described as having quickly risen in the ranks for his bravery. Yet, in light of the rest of the story, this association of Druse with a classical hero is ironic, or at the very least troubling. For one, despite his introduction of being surrounded by laurel, he has fallen wayside in his duties, literally having fallen asleep. Furthermore, when presented with the enemy, he hesitates in fulfilling his duty, trying to avoid shooting until it is finally non-negotiable. While not exactly the trials of Hercules, if the story were to end at that,



we would have a hero (albeit conflicted) who performed his duty and earns the laurel he is introduced with. At the end of the story, however, we discover the man he killed was his father, and patricide is hardly heroic, at least to modern sensibilities. So why the laurel? Because without it, Bierce's point wouldn't be made quite as poignantly—that is, the Civil War was not a stage for creating heroes, and should not be thought of nostalgically as having done so. Thus in introducing Druse as surrounded by laurel, Bierce is playing with the audience's expectations and shows through this irony that war is not a breeding ground for heroics, but for what is necessary in the line of duty.

8. C