

Horror and the Unexpected

In my usual seasonal reading last fall, I pulled out my copy of Classic Horror Tales and began reading the somewhat familiar stories. I say somewhat familiar, because I hadn't read them in a few years. Gothic stories possess a particularly magical quality in the fall, but I love a good gothic atmosphere at any time of year. The combination of the horror and the unexpected is particularly enjoyable. One story that I read, and have reread several times since, is one that I didn't remember having read before. I was surprised by its length and taken aback by finding it over before I thought it had begun, and I have been thinking about it since I shut the book. It was written by Ambrose Bierce, whose stories I have always enjoyed; they are always mysterious and ominous, and they generally have an unexpected ending to top it off. The first one I ever read was in an English anthology textbook in middle school and was titled "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". This story is called "One Summer Night."

Horror: The Beginning

Despite the title, this story starts out well enough for its genre: its subject, Henry Armstrong, finds himself buried but, unusually, not dead. The narration is in third-person, but is limited to the subject's point of view, and thus gives us a personal sense of the claustrophobia of being buried alive, as well as its accompanying darkness and silence. The one piece missing from this scenario, the first emotion one would generally feel upon finding oneself in this predicament, is desperation. Henry Armstrong seems oddly calm for a man in his situation. He is described as always having been "a hard man to convince", and that, though all of his senses "[compel] him to admit" that he has certainly been buried, this fact alone does not serve to convince him that he is, in fact, dead. I'm not sure any of us would be convinced either, in his situation, but stating it this way brings it oddly into focus. He finds himself to be seriously ill, and that he has "the invalid's apathy", which accounts for his lack of decisive action in the face of what is otherwise, or even still likely, certain death. And so, he falls asleep.

The Height of Fear

While “all was peace with” the sleeping Henry Armstrong, the next scene opens: however unlikely it may seem, all was not quiet in the graveyard above that night, either. A summer lightning storm is erratically lighting the sky, seemingly setting the headstones “dancing” in the flashes. “It was not a night in which any credible witness was likely to be straying about a cemetery”, so the next actors in the scene work with no fear of discovery, which, in their line of work, is obviously of utmost importance. The group is composed of two young student doctors from a nearby medical college and an enormous man named Jess, who had long worked at the cemetery as a “man-of-all-work” and whose “favorite pleasantry [was that] he knew ‘every soul in the place’”. These three men are at work trying to free the grave of its corpse, ostensibly to sell it to the awaiting horse and wagon stationed outside the gate and far from the public road, and, as the grave had only been filled hours before, the men’s work is easy and quick. They remove the casket and unscrew the lid, revealing the body of Henry Armstrong, when suddenly, lightning illuminates the air around them and thunder cracks loudly in the sky. What should happen next but that Henry Armstrong, the supposedly dead man being relieved from his grave “tranquilly [sits] up”, maintaining the same decorum he had had while buried and unsure of help. At this point, all hell breaks loose among the bodysnatchers. Seemingly, and justifiably, horrified beyond reason, they scream and run off, each in a different direction. “For nothing on earth” would the students have been enticed back to the grave, but what of the third man, Jess? We are told that he is “of another breed”.

Resolution?

The narrative pauses here and resumes “in the grey of the morning” when the two students arrive back at the medical college, pale and still terrified by their misadventure, and begin to wonder what to do given what they had seen. At the back of the building they find a horse and wagon hitched to the gate, and, upon entering the dissection room, they meet Jess, who stands and asks for the money he was promised. They turn, and see, on the long dissecting table, the naked body of Henry Armstrong, whose head is “defiled with blood and clay from a blow with a spade”. It was here that I was utterly taken aback. I had not expected the story to end so soon, after merely a page and a half,

and had been so engrossed in the story that I hadn't noticed the empty half of the page growing nearer the further I read.

Unexpected, or the Final Twist

Herein lies, I believe, part of the success of this horror story. It wouldn't be a horror story with the successful rescue of Mr. Armstrong, but, all things considered, one's hope is abruptly dispatched in the last two sentences of the story. Jess certainly was no common man doing the job of a bodysnatcher; he still retains the presence of mind to walk back to the frightful scene and finish the job he was going to be paid for. It didn't matter to him that the man was alive and that he had, by some stroke of luck, just rescued him from certain death; he was digging up a body for cash and was going to make sure he did just that.

Horror, but make it funny

Another part of the success of this story is the humor that Ambrose Bierce mixed in with the horror. His description of Henry Armstrong waking up in the buried coffin by itself would be enough to make one question the genre of the story being horror if not for the situation the character finds himself in. He, buried alive, remains "a hard man to convince", despite all his senses proclaiming his situation. His apathy in the face of a horrendous death, too, is comical. Had he found himself buried alive in one of Poe's stories, he would most certainly not have been able to fall asleep. Jess, too, serves as some comic relief; his description as "gigantic" seems a bit cliché in a horror story, but his calm demeanor and levelheadedness are distinctly un-horrifying. His reaction to the students' entry is also quite funny: he stands up from the bench where he's been sitting, grins, and requests the money he is owed. Job, and story, done.