Chickamauga

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMBROSE BIERCE

Ambrose Bierce was the tenth of thirteen children born to a pair of poor but literary parents who encouraged his love of books and writing. Bierce attended school in Indiana and, at the age of 15, he became an apprentice at a small abolitionist newspaper, *The Northern Indianan*. He briefly attended the Kentucky Military Institute before it burned down. In April 1861, just three weeks after the Civil War began, Bierce enlisted in the Union Army at the age of 19. Originally, he enlisted for three months' service, but he ended up reenlisting for three years and participating in several major battles, including Shiloh and Chickamauga. After a traumatic brain injury at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, Bierce was discharged from the army in January 1865. He experienced lifelong complications from his war wounds. Several of Bierce's works of fiction, including "Chickamauga," appear to have been influenced by his real-life experiences in battle. Bierce married Mary Ellen Day in 1871, and they had three children together. Two of these children died before Bierce did (one by suicide, and one by pneumonia). Bierce and his wife separated in 1888 after he discovered a compromising letter from an admirer of hers, and they divorced in 1904. Bierce had a career in journalism and, during his lifetime, was better-known for his journalism than for his fiction. Many of his most famous stories were written between 1888 and 1891, and many were influenced by his experience as a soldier. He is now well-known for both his war stories and his horror stories. In December 1913, Bierce traveled to Chihuahua, Mexico, where the Mexican Revolution was taking place. He was rumored to have been traveling with rebel troops, but he was never seen again.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Chickamauga" is based on a real American Civil War battle in which Ambrose Bierce fought during his service in the Union Army. The Civil War (1861-1865) was fought between the Union (Northern states) and the Confederacy (Southern states). The Union states wanted to abolish slavery but the Confederate states did not, and so, wanting to escape the federal government's control over their laws, the Confederate states seceded and the Civil War began. Although Bierce was from Union territory and served in the Union Army, the protagonist of "Chickamauga" is a southern child of a slaveholding father. The Battle of Chickamauga was fought on September 18-20, 1863 in Georgia—it had the second-highest number of casualties after the Battle of Gettysburg. Bierce fought in this battle—his knowledge of its events is first-hand.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Chickamauga" is part of a larger cycle of war stories by Ambrose Bierce, many of which were inspired by his own experiences as a soldier. His book *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, published in 1891, includes many of these stories, such as "Chickamauga," "A Horseman in the Sky," "One of the Missing," and the frequently-anthologized "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which, like "Chickamauga," investigates the dangers of having grandiose delusions about war. Bierce also wrote a memoir based on his experiences at the battle of Shiloh, called "What I Saw at Shiloh." Ambrose Bierce wrote extensively about the savage brutalities of war, and is said to have influenced the anti-war projects of other writers. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is one such book. Crane's novel, published only six years after "Chickamauga," is also set during the Civil War and explores the protagonist's twisted ideas about the meaning of war. Crane's protagonist wishes for a wound, a "red badge of courage" that would prove he is not a coward. Like "Chickamauga," *The Red Badge of Courage* focuses on the psychological horrors of war rather than enumerating all the external events of the war itself. Bierce's work can be said to have influenced both war writers and horror writers, but science fiction horror writer H. P. Lovecraft argued that nearly all of Bierce's stories were horror stories. Although Lovecraft is well-known for his science fiction horror stories such as "The Call of Cthulu" (1928) and *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), it is easy to see how he could be influenced by Bierce's war stories and view them as part of the horror genre, because of the way that Bierce's stories focus on the death and destruction caused by war, and in so doing depict war almost as a kind of force exerting its pull on those caught up in it, rather than telling a heroic narrative that glorifies war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Chickamauga
- **When Written:** 1889
- **Where Written:** San Francisco
- **When Published:** 1889
- **Literary Period:** American Naturalism, Civil War literature
- **Genre:** Short story, war fiction, horror fiction
- **Setting:** A forest and a plantation in northwestern Georgia during the American Civil War.
- **Climax:** The child protagonist discovers that his home has been destroyed and his mother is dead.
- **Antagonist:** War
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

A lot of "A" Children. Ambrose Bierce was the tenth of thirteen children, all of whom had names that began with the letter "A."

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Chickamauga," set during the American Civil War, a six-year old child in northwestern Georgia wanders into the forest carrying a wooden toy **sword** to play at being a soldier. As the child wanders deeper into the forest, the narrator provides information about the boy's father: he is a poor planter, and in his younger manhood he had been a soldier. Even now, the father still loves soldiering and often looks at books about war. As the child enjoys his adventure he commits the "common enough military error of pushing the pursuit to a dangerous extreme"—he's lost, but doesn't know it yet.

After the boy successfully crosses a stream, he briefly celebrates this "victory" before encountering a rabbit. The child is so afraid of this rabbit that he turns and flees, calls out inarticulate cries for his mother, weeps, stumbles, and then wanders around for an hour before relizing he is lost and sobbing himself to sleep, clutching his toy sword. As he sleeps, birds sing and squirrels run around, and somewhere far off there is a strange, muffled thunder, "as if the partridges were drumming in celebration of nature's victory over her immemorial enslavers." Hours pass before the child gets up, and by then the chill of evening has arrived. The boy is frightened by a ghostly mist rising off of the stream, then he notices a strange moving object which at first he cannot identify. He fears it might be another wild animal like a dog, pig, or bear. He then realizes this is not one creature, but many creatures, one followed by another.

The child finally realizes these are men, creeping on their hands and knees instead of walking. They come by the dozens and the hundreds, surrounded by the "deepening gloom" of the woods around them. Occasionally, a man stops crawling and does not go on again, because he is dead. In reality, the men are soldiers. However, the narrator tells us that the child does not note all of the details; they are "what would have been noted by an elder observer." The child seems to be comforted by the fact that they are men as opposed to wild animals, and does not seem to worry about or even notice the extent of their wounds. The men remind the child of a circus clown he saw the previous summer, and he laughs as he watches them, viewing them as "a merry spectacle." He remembers riding his father's slaves like horses for his own amusement, and attempts to do the same thing with the soldiers. The man that he climbs on flings the boy off, though, and shakes his fist at the child. The boy, "terrified at last," runs to a nearby tree, and the soldiers drag themselves on.

The boy continues to move down the slope towards the stream along with these crawling, staggering men, He places himself in the lead and directs the march, still playing soldier. The forest is littered with objects that are remnants of battle, such as knapsacks and broken rifles, and the ground has been trodden into mud by the tracks of men and horses going in both directions. But again, the narrator tells us that the child does not notice all of this. It is still implied at this point that the child's age is the sole reason why he does not notice everything that is going on around him.

A fire is burning on the belt of woods on the other side of the stream, and is "now suffusing the whole landscape." The stream and stones surrounding it are red with blood. The narrator reveals more gruesome details about the soldiers, such as that some of them are so wounded that they drown when they try to drink water. The child waves his cap in encouragement of the soldiers and points his toy sword in the direction of the fire as a "guiding light."

When the child reaches the fire, there is a blazing ruin of a building, and not a living thing is visible, but he is focused on the fire, which excites him, and dances in imitation of the flames. He runs around trying to collect fuel for the fire, but everything he finds is too heavy for him to throw into it, so he throws in his toy sword, which the narrator says is "a surrender to the superior forces of nature." The narrator also tells us the child's military career is over.

The child notices some outbuildings in the distance that look strangely familiar, but he cannot place them at first. Suddenly he realizes he is looking at his own plantation home and the surrounding forest, and that all of it is on fire. He runs around the ruin, and discovers the dead body of a white women who appears to have been shot in the head. It is his mother. The child makes wild and uncertain gestures and, for the second time in the story, he utters a series of inarticulate animal-like cries, but this time the narrator reveals that the child is deaf and mute. The child stands still, looking down at the body of his dead mother.

CHARACTERS

The Child – The story's protagonist is a six-year old, deaf-mute, white child growing up on a slaveholding plantation in northwestern Georgia during the Civil War. Although the child's age is revealed at the beginning of the story, the fact that he is deaf and mute is not revealed until the very end. The child is not given a name. Throughout the majority of the story, the child carries around a toy **sword** and pretends to be a soldier. He seems to be an adventurous child, wandering into the forest by himself and becoming lost, but there are also limits to his bravery, as he is terrified when he sees a harmless rabbit. The child is playful and innocent to the point of being naive, making a game out of the wounded soldiers he encounters rather than either fleeing from them or trying to help them. The child's

romantic ideas about war being adventurous, glorious, and good are constantly juxtaposed in the story with the brutal reality of the aftermath of the Civil War battle that the child slept through and fails to understand. Ultimately, the story shows those fantasies of war to be both destructive and self-destructive, as the child ultimately discovers that the wounded soldiers he has been pretending to lead were part of a battle that has decimated his home and killed his family.

The Soldiers – The only living, human characters with whom the child interacts during the course of the story are the group of wounded soldiers he encounters in the forest. The soldiers are a mystery to the child, and at first he cannot even identify them as human, thinking instead that they are dogs, pigs, or even bears. When he realizes they are men, he is not afraid. He fails to register their wounds, and tries to play with them. The narrator, of the story, however, reveals that the soldiers are retreating from a battle, and that many of these men are already dead or are currently dying. The child, however, pretends to be the soldier's leader, even going so far as to try to ride one like a horse. No words are spoken between the soldiers and the boy. At the end of the story, it becomes clear that the reason for the lack of communication—and for the boy's total inability to see the truth of the soldier's situation—is is because the child is deaf and mute. But while the child is still with the soldiers, the narrator has not yet revealed the child's situation, leaving it a mystery as to why to the child cannot or will not communicate with the soldiers, which drenches the entire interaction in a kind of ghostly horror, and forces the reader to register the brutality of war in a way that the child does not.

The Mother – The child's mother is mentioned three times in the story. First, when the child encounters the "formidable enemy" of the rabbit, he yells out inarticulate cries for his mother. Second, while he sleeps in the forest, the narrator reveals that back at the plantation, a mother's heart was breaking for her missing child. Although these details do not reveal much about the mother's character, they do establish a bond that one would expect to find between a mother and her six-year old son. The mother is not mentioned again until the end of the story, when the child discovers the dead body of a woman while inspecting the burned remains of his home. It is not explicitly stated that this woman is his mother, but it is implied because no other women are mentioned in the story, and also, the child screams in grief when he finds her.

The Father – The child's father is mentioned at the beginning of the story, when the child is first wandering into the forest to play at war with his toy **sword**. The child's father is now a slaveholding planter, but he used to be a soldier. The story makes clear that the child has learned his cavalier, playful attitude about war from his father, who holds similar ideas himself and loves to look at old books with pictures of battles and soldiers. That the child's disastrously romantic ideas about war come from his father broadens the story's critique of such fantasies of those who hold them—through the character of the father it's clear that, while the deaf-mute child is uniquely unable to grasp the reality of war, such views are widespread and destructive. The father's casual participation in the domination of others is further made clear by the fact that he owns slaves. It is not revealed whether the child's father survives at the end of the story. The narrator describes the child finding a dead woman's body, but not a dead man's. However, since the child's entire home has burned, it is reasonable to assume that his father may have also died, along with everyone else who lived at the plantation.

The Slaves – The slaves owned by the child's family are mentioned twice in the story. First, when the child is asleep in the woods, the narrator mentions that black and white men at the plantation home are searching the fields for the child. Second, when the child tries to ride the wounded soldiers like horses, the narrator comments that the child has done the same in the past with his father's slaves for his own entertainment. The fact that the Civil War is being fought over slavery is not explicitly mentioned in the story, but this is background information that a reader in Bierce's time would have probably been aware of. The fact that the boy tries to ride the slaves like horses but they still help search for him highlights the severity of the racial inequality at the time of the American Civil War, and further highlights the way that human society seems to be founded on the domination of one set of people by another, with most people giving little thought about the reality of that fact.

The Narrator – The narrator of the story is not quite a character—the narrator has no name, no history, and can't really be considered a person. Yet the narrator is a key part of the story, and subtly uses tone (the over-the-top language used to mock those who hold a romantic view of war) and the careful dissemination of information (such as the fact that the child is a deaf-mute) to convey the story's profound condemnation of the brutality of war, and of those people who recklessly fail to understand that brutality and instead view war as romantic and glorious.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FANTASY OF WAR VS. REALITY OF WAR

In "Chickamauga," a six-year old, deaf-mute child wanders into the forest to play at war. He gets lost,

falls asleep, and then wakes up to find himself in the awful aftermath of a Civil War battle. However, through most of the story, the boy doesn't understand the horrors he is witnessing. Instead, he delights in the spectacle, even pretending to be the maimed soldiers' leader. The juxtaposition between the way the uncomprehending boy perceives war and how the story's narrator and reader perceive the battle, coupled with the boy's final awful realization that this battle has destroyed his home and killed his family, has two affects. First, it amplifies the pure horror of war; the boy's inability to perceive that horror makes it all the more obvious to the reader. Second, it condemns the boy's idea—and all those who share that idea—of war as being heroic and exciting as not just naïve but complicit in promoting war and all its brutal destruction.

The story quickly establishes that the boy believes war to be exciting and glorious. Just as importantly, though, the story also makes clear that the boy's view is not unique to him, or to little boys. Rather, the story shows how such simplistic views of war are widespread among adults as well. The child begins the story by wandering into the forest with a **toy sword**, suggesting that he thinks of weapons as toys and battles as games. He pretends to be a soldier, fighting "invisible foes." When the boy gets lost in the woods, he cries himself to sleep, while comforting himself with his toy sword which he sees as his "companion." The capacity to commit violence gives the boy comfort. When the boy wakes up and finds himself surrounded by wounded soldiers (he slept through the Civil War battle of Chickamauga because of his deafness), he regards them as "a merry spectacle," moving among them freely and riding them like horses. He "placed himself in the lead, his wooden sword still in hand, and solemnly directed the march..." The child views the wounded soldiers as fun playmates, not as casualties in a devastating battle. Crucially, the story explains the origin of the boy's ideas about war. The boy's father was once a soldier, and "in the peaceful life of a planter the warrior-fire survived," such that the father loved "military books and pictures." The boy learned his ideas about war from his father. The story, then, makes it impossible to simply dismiss the boy's views as a result of being six years old, deaf, or mute. By connecting the boy's ideas to his father's ideas, the story indicates that such ideas are inherited from family and society—and makes clear that these ideas of war as being simple, heroic, and glorious are widespread.

The story then uses a variety of methods to poke increasingly larger holes in the boy's—and society's—simplistic ideas about war. One way the story does this is through style. The story describes the child's war-play in the forest in language that is flowery and intense: at one point it describes the boy's toy sword as "the weapon he bore bravely, as became the son of an heroic race." This language is so flowery and intense, in fact, that it is best described as mock-heroic: its intensity is meant to hint that it, and the ideas of the boy it describes, should not be taken seriously.

The narrator also makes the juxtaposition between the boy's understanding and an adult understanding more explicit. The narrator describes soldiers who are "maimed and bleeding," and mentions that some are so wounded that they drown when they try to drink water. The narrator then states that "not all of this did the child note; it is what would have been noted by an elder observer." Through tone and detail the story and its narrator build an ironic rift between what the child perceives and what the narrator and the reader both perceive, heightening the tension between the child's fantasy of war—a fantasy that the story has made clear is held by many who are not children at all—and its actual brutal reality.

In addition to using its style, the story also shows the dangerous and tragic foolishness of the boy's views through the events of the story. After "leading" the army of wounded soldiers, the boy sees a fire: "the spectacle pleased, and he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames." The reaction to violent destruction here is typical for the child: he's excited by it, just as the story makes clear his father was excited by fighting and defeating "savages" many years earlier. Soon after, however, the boy discovers that the fire has destroyed his home and that his family has been killed. The implication is that the devastation of battle spun out beyond just the battle, and resulted in destruction of civilians as well. In this moment the story also makes clear that the destruction of war isn't ever contained by war—it isn't limited to the soldiers or armies involved. Instead, it spins out of control, resulting in destruction to those like the boy's family not even taking active part. The destruction that excited the boy now devastates him and the boy's naïve fantasies of war are punctured. The mock-heroic language describing those original fantasies gives way to the boy's "inarticulate and indescribable cries" as he looks down at the body of his dead mother.

The boy's journey—from playing at the fantasy of war, to reveling in destruction, to despair at the actual, brutal, uncontrollable outcomes of war—demonstrates just how ridiculous and tragic those original fantasies were. By tying the boy's simplistic fantasies about war to those of the broader culture, and showing how the boy's journey led to the loss of everything he had, the story takes aim at society and humanity more generally, and implies that the simplistic glorification of war will only ever lead to tragedy and self-destruction.

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

"Chickamauga" is set during the Civil War, and shows the aftermath of the battle of Chickamauga through the eyes of a deaf, mute, six-year old Southern white child (who doesn't really understand what he is seeing). The story, to put it shortly, is about war. But while the most obvious war it portrays is that between men, the story also subtly describes a different war—a battle between man

and nature. The story portrays humanity—the boy himself but also the entire cultural tradition that the boy has inherited—as viewing nature as a rival, something to be overcome and conquered, just as we view other groups of humans as something to be conquered. But the story implies that humans are in fact a part of nature, and so humanity's struggle against nature is doomed to fail.

"Chickamauga" describes mankind as seeking to conquer nature, and connects this war against nature with fantasies of war as noble and bringing civilization to what was once "savage." When the boy in the story goes to play war, he doesn't stay around his house. He goes to the forest, connecting war with a desire to tame "wild" places. He then imagines himself battling the obstacles of the forest, forging a "shallow brook, whose rapid waters barred his direct advance." The boy sees nature as an enemy, to humorous effect when he encounters a rabbit and thinks it as a monstrous foe. After getting lost, he is terrified by the forest he had just imagined himself conquering. The boy always sees himself in conflict with nature, whether winning or losing.

The story connects the boy's ideas about overcoming nature to his society's: "this child's spirit, in bodies of its ancestors, had for thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest." Those ancestors had "conquered [their] way through two continents," a phrase that describes overcoming both other people within that land and the land itself. The boy's love of war stems most directly from his father, who fought people he thinks of as "naked savages." In this way, the story indicates that the fantasies of glorious war treasured by the boy, his father, and his ancestors is driven by an idea that they are fighting on the side of civilization against savagery, of humanity against nature, with an implication that humans often justify wars against other humans by imagining those other humans as "savages," as being more a part of nature than of humanity. This idea is amplified by the fact that the boy's Southern family owns slaves that the boy sometimes "rides" for fun—his own family justifies its domination of other humans by treating them like animals. Human war also harms nature directly in the story: soldiers battle in the forest, littering it with dead bodies and broken guns, staining its stream and stones with blood, and lighting it on fire. This suggests that humans defile nature by using it as a backdrop for our own battle, making nature into a casualty of our battles.

Even as "Chickamauga" shows how humans see themselves as being in conflict with nature, the story constantly blurs the boundaries between humans and nature, and suggests that humans are a part of nature. When the boy wakes after becoming lost in the forest and sees the wounded soldiers all around him, he first thinks they are animals—dogs, pigs, or maybe bears. A bit later, the narrator describes these soldiers as seeking to escape their "hunters," using language to make clear a connection between war (men hunting men) with man's war against nature (men hunting animals). When the boy falls asleep in the forest, the story treats him as just another part of the forest, with birds and squirrels chittering around his human form. At the same time, the story suggests that nature will not bear human attacks against it without response, as it connects the sounds of the battle that the boy is sleeping through to partridges squawking "in celebration of nature's victory over the son of her immemorial enslavers." (This reference to humanity's "enslavement" of nature can also be seen as a reminder that the Civil War is being fought over humanity's enslavement of its own species.)

By making clear that humanity is not distinct from nature, the story suggests that humanity's attempts to conquer nature will naturally end in disaster. Near the end of the story, the boy comes upon a fire. He's delighted by its destructive power—"he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames." The boy wants to contribute to the fire, to aid its destruction. He throws in his toy wooden **sword**, which the narrator describes as "a surrender to the superior forces of nature." Immediately after, the boy discovers that the fire has destroyed his family's home, and that his parents have been killed. The death of the boy's mother and the fire's destruction of his home are literal manifestations of nature's triumph over humanity. These events are a direct result of humanity's Civil War battle, certainly, but they also result from the unavoidable facts of nature: fire spreads, and some wounds to the body are mortal. In this way the story suggests that in seeking to conquer other humans and nature (which the story has made clear is in fact the same instinct), humans step outside the normal order of nature and in so doing create outsize reactions: more war, more killing, and nature itself burning out of control. When the boy discovers his dead mother, he utters "a series of inarticulate cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey." The boy in his grief is like the animals he earlier thought himself to be above, implying that despite human's self-conception as civilized conquerors of the "savage" (whether other people or nature itself), humans are in fact a part of nature. Mankind's efforts to conquer nature will therefore inevitably end in disaster, because any such war against nature is in fact a war against itself.

REALITY VS. IMAGINATION

The six-year old, deaf-mute protagonist of "Chickamauga" is often unaware of what is truly happening around him, creating an ironic distance between how the protagonist perceives the events of the story and how the narrator and the reader perceive those same events. This ironic distance works to amplify the story's themes; the protagonists' obvious *misunderstanding* about the reality of what's going make the reader's *understanding* of that reality even stronger. At the same time, while the child's imaginative fantasies are extreme—in large part because the

boy is not only six years old but also deaf and mute, thus locking him into his own world in a unique way—the story works to make clear that the boy is in many ways different in degree but not kind from other people. That is, the story makes clear that the boy is joined by the rest of humanity in seeing the world through fantasy and imagination rather than seeing the true reality, and that such ways of seeing the world in the end lead to disaster.

Throughout the story, the narrator knows more than the child, and chooses to disclose certain details to the reader that the protagonist is not aware of. Some of those details are about the battle of Chickamuaga itself, which took place while the child was asleep, and others are details about the horrific wounds the soldiers are left with as they attempt to crawl to a stream to drink water. The narrator notes that thousands of soldiers participated in the battle, that the forest is littered with broken weapons and supplies, and that many of the soldiers are already dead. However, "not all of this did the child note; it is what would have been noted by an elder observer." Presumably almost anyone reading the story would be an "elder" of this six-year-old child, and so the narrator in this way calls out for the reader to notice these horrific details.

While the narrator calls out details of the battle to the reader, the narrator also deliberately conceals details about the child from the reader. Most importantly, the narrator does not reveal that the child is deaf and mute until the very end, when the child utters "inarticulate cries" upon discovering his mother's dead body. The lack of clarity regarding the child's behavior leads the reader, throughout the majority of the story, to find the child's inability to understand the reality around him as astonishing or shocking. The revelation that the child is deaf and mute at the end of the story explains why he was able to sleep through a battle between thousands of men, why he never speaks to the soldiers, and why his cries for his mother when he saw the terrifying rabbit were "inarticulate" just like his cries at the end of the story. But the feeling that the story creates—of the horrific disconnect between the child's understanding of war versus its reality—lingers on even after the story "explains" the child's unique situation.

Ultimately, the story uses the child's naivete and inability to recognize the horror of war as a way to implicate everyone else who also do the same thing. The child, after all, has an excuse: he's six, deaf, and mute. But the child's father, who valorizes war and passed on these ideas to his child, is no such thing. Further, the narrator explains how the "child's spirit, in bodies of its ancestors, had for thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest…born to war and dominion as a heritage." All of this suggests that the child's glorified view of war as glorious and adventurous is an idea he inherited from his family and his society. Further, the narrator's comment that "elder observers" would notice the details that the child missed can be read as ironic. After all, adult commanders sent those soldiers to fight and die. People not at the battle might remark on the casualties but will never truly understand the horror of them. The story, then, provides a vision of the horror of war that most of its readers will *not* have noticed, at least until reading the story. And any shock at the naivete of the child, therefore, must be accompanied by shock at the way that *everyone's* imagination and fantasies work to block them from seeing reality. And in the story of the child—who ends up participating in a battle he doesn't understand only to discover that the battle has destroyed his home and killed his family—the story makes clear that reality can be misunderstood, but it can't in the end be denied.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TOY SWORD

The boy's toy sword symbolizes the way that a romantic conception of war inevitably leads those who hold to the brutal devastation of real war. Initially, the child—influenced by his father's idealized ideas about war—views war as a game, wandering into the forest to play soldier with his toy sword. The boy's exuberant play warmongering soon leads to a limited kind of disaster, as the overeager boy soon becomes lost in the forest. The boy then cries himself to sleep, clutching his sword, which the narrator describes as, "no longer a weapon but a companion." This description suggests an evolution in the child's attitude about war: not only is it a fun game to him, but it is also something that he associates with comfort—a comfort that may arise from his family's connection to war through his father's soldiering. The child at this point in the story does not view war and family as being at odds with each other, but rather as intertwined.

After the child wakes up and encounters the wounded soldiers retreating from the Civil War battle he just slept through, he continues to carry the toy sword around as he "leads" the group. The child is still playing war, even as he is surrounded by dying and severely wounded soldier's carrying real weapons. That the child doesn't notice the actual pain and death of war as he continues to play at war emphasizes the way that romantic ideas of war as fun or glorious can blind those who hold those views to the obvious realities of war. Similarly, as the soldiers that the boy thinks he is leading die around him, he hardly notices: his ideas of war make him a "leader" who is at once ridiculous and cruel, uncaring for those he thinks he is leading.

Late in the story, the boy (along with the wounded men) come upon a raging fire. The fire entrances and delights the boy, and he searches for a way to help fuel its burning. Put another way: the boy is delighted by the fire's destruction, and he wants to be

a part of that destruction. When everything he wants to throw into it turns out to be too heavy for him to lift, the boy, "in despair", throws in his sword. With this action, the narrator states that the boy's military career was over. Yet the boy's action can best be read as a surrender to the destruction caused by war. As the story portrays it, even though the boy is reluctant to throw in his sword, he can't stop himself: the boy can do nothing except participate in it. Throwing in the sword, then, can be taken as the boy giving up his belief in romantic ideas of war as a part of actually partaking in true destruction—and, symbolically, it can be read as capturing how romantic ideas of war lead inevitably from initially noble ideas about war to participation in wanton destruction. Further, at the story's end, the boy discovers that the battle and fire has also destroyed his home and killed his family. In this way, through the developing symbology of the toy sword throughout "Chickamauga," Bierce suggests that cavalier, romanticized ideas of war will lead not just to destruction, but self-destruction.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Civil War Stories* published in 1994.

Chickamauga Quotes

"This child's spirit, in bodies of its ancestors, had for thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest…From the cradle of its race it had conquered its way through two continents and passing a great sea had penetrated a third, there to be born to war and dominion as a heritage.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote near the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the child wandering off alone into the forest to play at war. In the quote, the narrator situates the child's play in the centuries-long historical context of colonialism, war, and slavery in which his ancestors have participated. Throughout the story, the child is unaware of the full extent of the horrors happening around him, but this is not simply a result of being six years old, deaf, and mute. Instead, the child seems to have inherited his ideas that war is a fun and glorious game from his father and his other ancestors. The quote explains that the child's ancestors have been using violence to conquer other civilizations for thousands of years. Since the child's father owns slaves, and the family is living in 1860's Georgia, the reader can assume that the child's ancestors are European. Although this quote does not detail the history of colonialism, it does explain in broad strokes that Europeans have been fighting wars, conquering lands, and enslaving other groups of people for thousands of years. The third continent mentioned in this passage is North America, where Europeans pushed indigenous peoples out in order to conquer it for themselves.

This history and legacy provides important context for the child's attitude about war. His cavalier view of violence is not just a result of his age or of being deaf and mute. Rather, he seems to have been taught (either directly or indirectly) that war and conquest are right and noble—that there is glory in winning battles, and that it is part of his family legacy.

Yet the over-the-top language that the narrator uses to convey all this information, and the fact that the narrator is doing so to describe a child going to play with a toy sword in the forest, creates a sense of dissonance. That is by design. The narrator's intense heroic tone, given the context, is meant to be understood as being "mock-heroic," as making fun of that which it describes. Throughout the story, the narrator's descriptions of the child and his ancestors' sense of the glory, fun, and goodness of war and domination are meant to mock rather than support those ideas.

"In his younger manhood the father had been a soldier, had fought against naked savages and followed the flag of his country into the capital of a civilized race to the far South. In the peaceful life a planter the warrior-fire survived; once kindled, it is never extinguished. The man loved military books and pictures and the boy had understood enough to make himself a wooden sword, though even the eye of his father would hardly have known it for what it was. This weapon he now bore bravely, as became the son of an heroic race.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Father, The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also comes at the beginning of the story, when the child is wandering off by himself into the forest to play soldier. Here, the narrator provides information about the child's father in order to further place the child's ideas about war in context. The child's father used to be a soldier, but even now in his life as a planter, he still loves military books and pictures, and the "warrior-fire" survives because "once kindled, it is never extinguished." The narrator then suggests a causal link between father and son's attitudes about war, by following the description of the father's continued celebration of his own past experiences as a soldier with the phrase "the boy had understood enough to make himself a wooden sword." In this way, the quote further establishes that the child's excitement about war is founded on his father's similar excitement—this way of seeing the world is learned, and the results of this outlook arise not from the child being naïve in his ideas about war, but from the child learning such naïve ideas from his father.

The toy sword is also the central symbol of the story, and the narrator gives important information about it here. First, the child created it himself, but he did so in response to his father's attitude. The child's glorification of war, then, is a direct result of his family's attitude about war. That the father would hardly be able to recognize the toy sword for what it was makes clear that the child did not do a very good job creating the sword, which helps develop the idea that there's a big difference between how this child perceives war and what war is actually like in reality. The child's ideas about war are thus naïve and underdeveloped at the beginning of the story: he has no idea how brutal real war actually is.

This quote appears after the child has played at war, defeating invisible enemies, and without realizing it gotten lost in the forest. This passage highlights the gap between the child's perception of events and the reality of what is going on around him. This rabbit is completely harmless, but the child is overwhelmed with fear, misinterpreting the level of danger he is facing. This contrast is further developed later in the story when the child encounters the hoard of dying soldiers, but does not fear them because they are men instead of animals. The contrast between how the child reacts to a rabbit and how he reacts to a hoard of hundreds of dying soldiers also develops the theme of humanity's struggle against nature. The child fears harmless aspects of nature more than he fears actual human war. In this scene, that misunderstanding is played for humor, but the fact that it is funny now will only amplify the horror of the child's lack of fear when he encounters the dying soldiers later.

This quote also helps develop the child's character and his relationship with his mother. Because he is so afraid of the rabbit, he utters "inarticulate cries for his mother." This establishes a normal relationship between a child this age and his mother: he calls out for her when afraid, even though she is nowhere near him and will not be able to hear him. The quote also hints at the fact that the child is deaf and mute, although it does not say so explicitly. The cries are "inarticulate," which could mean that he is so afraid that he has temporarily lost the ability to form words, but after the narrator reveals at the end of the story that the child is deaf and mute, the word "inarticulate" takes on new meaning and it becomes clear that the child could never form articulate words in the first place.

❝ He suddenly found himself confronted with a new and more formidable enemy: in the path that he was following, sat, bolt upright, with ears erect and paws suspended before it, a rabbit! With a startled cry the child turned and fled, he knew not in what direction, calling with inarticulate cries for his mother, weeping, stumbling, his tender skin cruelly torn by brambles, his little heart beating hard with terror—breathless, blind with tears—lost in the forest!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Mother, The Child

Related Themes:   

Page Number: Page 42

Explanation and Analysis

❝ Somewhere far off was a strange, muffled thunder, as if the partridges were drumming in celebration of nature's victory over the son of her immemorial enslavers. And back at the little plantation, where white men and black were hastily searching the fields and hedges in alarm, a mother's heart was breaking for her missing child.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Slaves, The Father, The Mother, The Child

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs right after the child sobs himself to sleep in the forest. In reality, the strange, muffled thunder in the

distance is the sound of the massive Civil War battle of Chickamauga, but the narrator does not reveal this directly at this time. Instead, the narrator compares the strange sound to partridges drumming to celebrate nature's victory over humans. In this way, the narrator suggests that there is some sort of struggle occurring between humanity and nature, just like there is a struggle (war) happening between two groups of humans. Throughout the story, the narrator suggests that humans are mistreating nature as well as mistreating each other, and that nature will respond.

This quote also illustrates that there are wide gaps between what is truly happening in the story—what the narrator reveals to the reader—and what the child protagonist perceives. While the narrator does not explicitly reveal the true cause of the muffled thunder, the narrator does reveal that back at the child's home, his parents and the slaves have noticed that he has gone missing and are frantically searching for him. Throughout the story, the narrator is omniscient while the child knows very little of what is going on, with the reader placed in between the narrator and the child in terms of their knowledge of the events of the story. This dynamic creates dramatic irony, which further amplifies the child's misconceptions about war and violence in the story.

> Suddenly he saw before him a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal—a dog, a pig—he could not name it; perhaps it was a bear…But something in the form or movement of this object—something in the awkwardness of its approach—told him it was not a bear, and curiosity was stayed by fear. He stood still and as it came slowly on gained courage every moment, for he saw that at least it had not the long, menacing ears of the rabbit…Before it had approached near enough to resolve his doubts he saw that it was followed by another and another. To right and left were many more; the whole open space about him was alive with them—all moving toward the brook.
>
> They were men. They crept upon their hands and knees

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Soldiers, The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42-43

Explanation and Analysis

This quote details the process of the child first seeing the group of wounded soldiers retreating from the battle and then gradually coming to understand that they are humans—it's noteworthy that he actually never fully understands that they are wounded soldiers. This lengthy process of realization demonstrates the difference between the child's perception of what's around him and the reality. The child's confusion as to what the men are also reveals that the distinction between humans and animals is slippery. While on the one hand it's awful and little funny that the child mixes up the men with these animals, it also points to the deeper truth that humans *are* animals, that humans are a part of the nature that they so often seek to tame and conquer.

Ironically, the child's fear subsides as he realizes these figures are men. Earlier in the story, he was terrified of a rabbit, so he is comforted when he notices these creatures do not have scary ears like the rabbit. In reality, of course, the men are far more fearsome than any rabbit or other animal: they are soldiers, with weapons, and trained to kill. The child's various misunderstandings once more highlight the deeper misunderstandings that all people hold about the reality of war and the relative dangers of nature and humanity.

> Not all of this did the child note; it is what would have been noted by an elder observer; he saw little but that these were men, yet crept like babes. Being men, they were not terrible, though unfamiliarly clad. He moved among them freely, going from one to another and peering into their faces with childish curiosity. All their faces were singularly white and many were streaked and gouted with red. Something in this—something too, perhaps, in their grotesque attitudes and movements—reminded him of the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus, and he laughed as he watched them. But on and ever on they crept, these maimed and bleeding men, as heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity. To him it was a merry spectacle. He had seen his father's negroes creep upon their hands and knees for his amusement—had ridden them so, "making believe" they were horses. He now approached one of these crawling figures from behind and with an agile movement mounted it astride.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Slaves, The Soldiers, The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

By directly telling the reader that the child does not notice or comprehend all the details being described, the narrator highlights the distance between what the protagonist knows and what the narrator and the reader both know. The narrator forces the reader to confront the actual brutalities of the battle, even though the child does not. At the same time, the narrator's comment that any "elder observer" would automatically notice these details could also be read as being ironic. The battle described in the story is the real-world Civil War battle of Chickamauga, and most people only experienced the battle through newspaper or other reports about it, and most likely focused more on its strategic impact rather than the actual physical horror experienced by the soldier's involved. As throughout the rest of the story, then, the way that the story and narrator make clear the child's inability to understand the brutal reality of war is also an indictment of the "elder observers" who also, in practice, overlook that brutality.

The moment in which the child tries to ride the soldiers like horses, because he has formerly done the same with his family's slaves, is important. Through the boy's mirrored actions, the story links his family's—and ancestor's—legacy of war and conquest with the slavery practiced in the United States South before the Civil War. Both are founded on a willingness and desire to dominate others, on a sense that mistreating and using others is a right or product of heritage.

The child's initial inability to distinguish the men from animals, coupled with his attempt to ride them like horses, further blurs the boundaries between humanity and nature. Although the child seems to draw a line between humanity and nature when he is less afraid of the soldiers than a rabbit and the surrounding forest, he is also incapable of telling the difference between the two, in part because humans are in fact animals, and in part because the soldiers are so wounded that they do not look the way they used to look. And it is instructive that the boy responds to this blurred boundary by seeking to use, tame, and dominate, much as humanity more generally does to nature.

> An observer of better experience in the use of his eyes would have noticed that these footprints pointed in both directions; the ground had been twice passed over—in advance and in retreat. A few hours before, these desperate, stricken men, with their more fortunate and now distant comrades, had penetrated the forest in thousands. Their successive battalions, breaking into swarms and reforming in lines, had passed the child on every side—had almost trodden on him as he slept. The rustle and murmur of their march had not awakened him. Almost within a stone's throw of where he lay they had fought a battle; but all unheard by him were the roar of the musketry, the shock of the cannon, "the thunder of the captains and the shouting." He had slept through it all, grasping his little wooden sword with perhaps a tighter clutch in unconscious sympathy with his martial environment, but as heedless of the grandeur of the struggle as the dead who had died to make the glory.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Soldiers, The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs while the child has installed himself as the "leaded" of the group of maimed and wounded soldiers. In it, the narrator once again describes for the reader details that the child fails to notice or understand. In this case, the child has no idea that he slept through an entire battle, both the attack and retreat. Because the narrator has not yet revealed at this point in the story that the child is deaf and mute, it seems almost incredible that the child could be so oblivious as to have slept through it. Once again, the narrator portrays the child as being completely unable to recognize the reality of war. And yet, in the child's sleep, he clutches his sword, as if "in unconscious sympathy with his martial environment." In this way, the narrator once more implies the way that the child has been indirectly taught "sympathy" for war and battle.

The narrator then goes on to describe the child as being "as heedless of the grandeur of the struggle as the dead who had died to make the glory." Before this line, the narrator portrayed the child as almost ridiculously oblivious to the reality of war around him. But now the narrator equates the child's "heedlessness" to that of the soldiers who fought in the battle. In one sense, this simply reinforces the child's own lack of understanding—he understands no more than dead men. But it also makes clear the lie of the "grandeur"

and "glory" of battle in the first place. The soldiers who have to actually fight in the war may have done so to win glory, but in the end they don't win any glory. They die. Throughout the story, the narrator's use of the word "glory" is ironic, meant to demonstrate how ridiculous it sounds to talk about glory in the context of war, which produces nothing but dead and maimed soldiers.

[The child] approached the blazing ruin of a dwelling. Desolation everywhere! In all the wide glare not a living thing was visible. He cared nothing for that; the spectacle pleased, and he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames. He ran about, collecting fuel, but every object that he found was too heavy for him to cast in from the distance to which the heat limited his approach. In despair he flung in his sword—a surrender to the superior forces of nature. His military career was at an end.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Child

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the child has abandoned the soldiers and run to look at the fire, which now dominates the scene and captivates him. Awed by the fire's destructive power, the boy wants to be connected to it, and so he feels the need to feed the fire some fuel. Ultimately, unable to lift anything else, he gives in to his compulsion to give in to the might of the fire and throws in his toy sword.

This moment is thematically rich. The toy sword has been the central symbol of the story, and has embodied the child's naïve ideas about the glory and excitement of war. In throwing the sword into the fire, the child gives up those ideals in service to a greater need: his desire to connect with the pure, mindless, destructive power of the fire. That compulsion to and excitement about pure destruction hints at the deeper impulses that often feed war—not ideals and the spread of "civilization," but rather the thrill of destruction. The boy's military career is at an end, in part, because in this scene he sacrifices any military ideals to the pure brute desire to destroy.

At the same time, the fire represents the way that the destruction that humanity wreaks upon itself and upon nature, will get amplified by nature in turn. The fire is an obvious byproduct of the battle that was just fought, but now it rages out control, in ways more powerful than any army. The implication is that humanity may devastate nature, but that it will in the end reap what it sows.

Finally, the child's sacrifice of the sword marks the end of the child's fantastical war game, in which he has completely and profoundly misunderstood the reality of war. The sacrifice of the sword signals that the child is about to be forced to confront the realities of war and violence rather than continuing to play a game in which war is fun and soldiers, dying soldiers are clowns, and the desolation around him is thrilling and bears no consequences.

There, conspicuous in the light of the conflagration, lay the dead body of a woman—the white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged, the long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood. The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles—the work of a shell.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Mother, The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first moment in the story where the difference between what the child, narrator, and reader perceive disappears. The narrator has always understood the brutal reality of war. The child just as obviously has not. But the graphic details of this scene not only shock the child to understand the reality of war, they are so gruesome that they come as a shock to the reader as well. All through the story the narrator has found ways to subtly use the child's lack of understanding of the reality of war as a way to also critique the broader lack of understanding even among "elder observers." This moment is less subtle, as the narrator forces both child and reader to confront this awful scene.

The narrator chooses not to explicitly name the woman as the child's mother, but it is strongly implied that this is the case since the mother is the only white woman mentioned in the story. The withholding of the label of "mother" can be read as capturing the way that her wounds have obscured

her facial features to such a degree that she is no longer recognizable as herself, or the way that her death has transformed her from *mother* to *body*. The description of the body—with its "deranged" clothes and gunshot to the head—also imply to the reader that what happened on the farm was likely no mere accident, but rather an attack that likely involved both rape and cold-blooded murder. What happened on the farm to put it another way, was nothing like the boy's pretty ideas about war, and even worse than the mindless destructive force of the fire: it was the reality of war, bloodlust and awful cruelty, spilling out beyond the confines of the battlefield to wreak destruction on all around it.

> He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey—a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child was a deaf mute.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Mother, The Child

Related Themes:

Page Number: Page 46

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the child has discovered the dead body of his mother. Throughout the story, the narrator (purposely) and the child (by virtue of his youth and situation)have both confused the boundaries between humans and animals by comparing a human to an animal or by not being able to tell the difference. Here, the narrator does this again by comparing the child's cries to that of an ape or turkey. The narrator also finally reveals here that the child is deaf and mute, shedding new light on the child's behavior throughout the story. The child never speaks to the soldiers he encounters, nor do they speak to him, but the reason for this is not fully explained until the end of the story. The child's cries for his mother when he saw a terrifying rabbit were also "inarticulate," but the implications of this were not fully revealed until the end of the story either.

The narrator's choice to conceal this information until the end forces the reader to read the majority of the story in a kind of amazement at the child's lack of understanding of what is going on, which in turn amplifies the horror of the story. Meanwhile, the narrator and story have also implicated the adults around the child—his family; his ancestors; his society—in teaching him to hold his naïve ideas about war. Now, by revealing that the child can neither hear nor talk, the reader suddenly has an explanation for the child's behavior. But that explanation only increases the condemnation of the world around the child for his ridiculous naivety. As a child who can neither hear nor speak, the child has less means than others to judge the world outside of what he is taught by those around him. In this way, the child, once revealed as deaf and mute, becomes a kind of vessel for the lessons he's been taught; the child's ridiculous naivety becomes *primarily* a product of what he's absorbed from the people around him. Any feeling that the reader has had condemning the child, becomes a condemnation of the adults who taught him the views he held.

Finally, the child's reaction to finding his dead mother is quite different from his reaction to finding dead and dying soldiers. When he encountered the dead soldiers, he thought they were interesting, amusing, and even funny, but when he encounters his dead mother, he is forced to recognize the situation for what it is, and he reacts with profound grief and horror. The child's final confrontation with death suggests that a delusional view of war as a fun game cannot last, and that such naivety will rather eventually lead to war and a tragic, too-late understanding of war's brutal reality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHICKAMAUGA

One afternoon a six-year old child wanders alone into the forest near his "rude" home, carrying a wooden **toy sword**. The child is playing soldier, delighting in the freedom of the forest and the opportunity for exploration, just as—the narrator of the story explains—the child's ancestors "had for thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest" and had "conquered its way through two continents" such that the boy was born "to war and dominion as a heritage."

The child's creation of a toy sword immediately establishes his perspective that war is a game to play at. At first, it might seem simple to chalk up the child's attitude about war to his age, since it's common for small children to play with toy versions of weapons. However, the narrator quickly provides information about the child's ancestors that makes it impossible for the reader to dismiss his attitude as simply being a product of his youth. The boy's ancestors have been participating in actual wars, conquering land and engaging in colonialism and slavery for generations. This suggests that the boy thinks the way he does—that war is a glorious game—because he has inherited that idea from his ancestors, who viewed actual war in the same way. The narrator's tone and language throughout this early part of the story is also important. The language is so over-the-top grandiose that it can be read as sarcastic mockery; the narrator thinks these simple ideas of war are silly.

The child's father is a poor planter, who in his youth was a soldier who had "fought naked savages" and still loved "military books and pictures" that he looked at with the boy. The child created the **toy sword** in imitation of his father, even though the narrator comments that the father would perhaps not be able to identify the toy sword as a sword if he saw it. The child carries his toy sword bravely, as befitted "the son of an heroic race." He imitates the postures and movements of soldiers as he wanders deeper into the forest.

Not only is the boy's view of war something he inherited from his ancestors—he learned it directly from his father. The boy's father's view of war is worth considering: it focuses on an idea of bringing order and civilization to the uncivilized and natural—i.e. "savages." The father clearly finds this idea of war noble, but once again the narrator's tone suggests that the idea itself is, at best, naïve. That the narrator establishes that the child inherited his viewpoint about war from his family at the very beginning of the story implies that the narrator wants the reader to understand this connection before narrating the events of the story. The outcome of the story are not to be blamed on this young naïve boy, but rather on the ideas of war in the culture and society that produced him.

The child soon becomes "reckless by the ease with which he overcame invisible foes" and commits "the common enough military error of pushing the advance to a dangerous extreme." He wanders too far into the woods, without knowing it, and comes to a wide but shallow brook with rapid waters. After he successfully crosses the stream, he briefly celebrates this victory, and the narrator says that, like many other conquerors, he cannot "curb the lust for war / Nor learn that tempted fate will leave the loftiest star."

The child imagines war as easy and simple: he overcomes his imaginary foes easily, with neither setback nor blood. Yet the narrator makes clear that imagining war to be this way—even when the battle itself is imaginary—will lead to disaster, as the boy gets lost without even realizing, yet, that he is lost. The boy fighting this imaginary battle in the forest also creates an image of him fighting against the forest itself—the first hint of the story's suggestion that when humanity fights itself, it is also fighting against nature. The quoted poem in the story that contains the lines "curb the lust for war, Nor learn that tempted fate will leave the loftiest star," is from Lord Byron's poem "June 18 Defeat of Napoleon," about the fall of Napoleon at the 1815 Battle of Waterloo. In this battle, Napoleon was defeated and lost all his power. This comparison of the child to Napoleon foreshadows the end of the story where the child's and other characters' mistaken views about war lead to death and destruction rather than eternal honor and glory.

Soon after the child crosses the stream, though, he encounters the "new and more formidable enemy" of a rabbit. The child, terrified, turns and runs, calls with "inarticulate cries" for his mother, and weeps and stumbles through the forest, suddenly realizing that he is lost. After more than an hour he becomes so exhausted that he sobs himself to sleep while clutching his **toy sword**, which is "no longer a weapon but a companion."

The boy imagines himself a conquering war hero, but is terrified of a harmless rabbit. The scene is humorous, but also thematically rich. It illustrates the child's disconnect between his imagination and reality, mocks his idea of war as easy and heroic when he is terrified in the face of even the slightest opposition (even that of a rabbit), and also once again hints at the conflict between humanity and nature, and the inherent fear that humanity feels toward nature. Once he realizes he is lost, the boy views his toy sword as a comforting companion—the child is more comfortable with human violence than he is with the natural world of the forest around him.

As the boy sleeps, animals move and sing around him, and somewhere far off there is a "strange, muffled thunder, as if the partridges were drumming in celebration of nature's victory over her immemorial enslavers." The narrator reveals that back at the "little plantation," white and black men search for the boy in the fields and hedges in alarm, and the mother's heart breaks for her missing child.

As the boy sleeps nature continues on around him, suggesting that humanity's efforts to "conquer continents" and tame nature doesn't change the fact that humanity is a part of nature. At the same time, the strange, muffled thunder is actually the sounds of the Civil War battle of Chickamauga taking place while the child sleeps, but the narrator describes the sound as being like partridges celebrating nature's victory against her enslavers. This draws attention to the effects that the human battle is having on nature in this story: the child's imaginary war takes place in the forest, but the actual battle takes place in the forest as well, so humans are using nature as a backdrop for their own violence and carelessly damaging nature as well. Mankind, then, is a part of nature; but its wars destroy and enslave nature, and the implication here is that in the face of such actions nature will inevitably respond. Also worth noting is that right after the suggestion that humans are enslaving nature comes a mention of slavery back at the boy's plantation home: his father owns slaves, and those slaves are currently searching for the missing child. Since this story is based on a real Civil War battle, and the Civil War was being fought over slavery, a connection is drawn here between the war, dominion, and enslavement that humans commit against each other and the war, dominion, and enslavement committed against nature.

Hours pass before the boy wakes up and rises to his feet. He feels the chill of evening, but no longer cries, even when he is frightened by a ghostly mist rising off the stream. Suddenly, he sees a strange moving object. At first he can't identify what it is, and thinks that it might be another wild animal such as a pig, dog, or even a bear. As the object gets closer, the boy realizes it is a group of objects rather than one. He gains some courage when he notices that at least these objects do not have the "long, menacing ears of the rabbit." Then he realizes they are men, and that there are many of them..

This section of the story complicates the boundaries between humanity and nature. At first, the child assumes the men are some sort of animal, and he is uneasy, but when he realizes they do not have long, menacing ears like the rabbit, he gains some courage. In reality, though the boy doesn't yet realize it, these men are soldiers, and certainly more dangerous than anything in nature.

The men creep on their hands and knees by the dozens and the hundreds through the deep gloom of the woods. Some of the men try to rise to their feet, but fall back down to their knees. Occasionally one of the men who pauses moving doesn't start again—that man has died. Some men seem to make movements as if praying. The narrator comments that the boy actually didn't notice all of these details, which are things that would have been noticed by an "elder observer."

The image of the crawling, dying men is strange, almost phantasmagorical. By this point in the story, the reader starts to have a sense that the men are soldiers, but because the story is filtered through the child's perception, it is not totally clear what's happening beyond the horror of the scene—which in turn emphasizes just that, the horror. Further, when the narrator comments that the child doesn't catch the details but that an "elder observer" would, it in effect calls on the reader to really pay attention to these details, to really attend to the horror of these crawling men, praying, unable to stand, dying as they fall. Yet the narrator's comment can also be read as being ironic. The narrator has already made clear that the boy's view of war as simple and glorious is inherited from his father and his ancestors—those are all adults who haven't noticed these details.

The boy just sees that they are men, though they are wearing unfamiliar clothes and crawl on their hands and knees like babies. The boy wanders among them curiously, peering into their faces. The men remind the child of a clown he saw the past summer, because their faces are white and streaked with red. He laughs while he watches them. Meanwhile, as these "maimed and bleeding men" keep crawling onward, the child delights in this "merry spectacle."

The unfamiliar clothes that the soldiers wear are military uniforms. The juxtaposition between the awful reality of the scene and the boy's reaction to it intensifies, as the boy sees horribly injured soldiers smeared with blood and is reminded of clowns from a circus. The boy's reaction to the wounded soldiers—especially his laugh—is at once shocking and ridiculous. And, yet, once again the way that the story and narrator have linked the child's idea of war to that of broader society's view of war turns the child's strange and awful response to these dying men into not just a condemnation of the child, but also an implicit condemnation of that society. After all, supporters of whichever side won this battle will cheer its victory, and will never engage with the brutal reality of these soldiers crawling and dying in the forest.

The narrator notes that the child used to sometimes ride on the backs of his father's slaves as if they were horses, and now he tries to do the same to one of the men. However, the man flings him off and shakes his fist at the boy. The man has no lower jaw, and the boy, finally frightened, runs and hides behind a tree.

This second mention of the child's family's slaves highlights the child's participation in an oppressive system that is part of the network of atrocities his ancestors have been committing for generations. The child sees domination as natural, as fun, and treats his father's slaves with disrespect for his own amusement. The boy has been brought up to see those who lack power as playthings, including this soldier. Yet the boy's use of the soldier as an object mirrors to a degree the way that society has also used this soldier: as a tool in a war, just as a horse is a tool in war. The boy's dehumanizing actions, which are so clearly strange and out of place, once again highlight adult society's similar dehumanizing actions, which are accepted as a matter of course.

The men continue crawling toward the stream, like a "swarm of great black beetles." Rather than darkening with the coming of night, the forest brightens as a "strange red light" glows in the distance. After a moment the boy comes out and places himself ahead of the men in order to direct the march with his wooden **sword**. The narrator states: "Surely such a leader never before had such a following."

The boundaries between humanity and nature are once again blurred when the narrator compares the group of men with a different type of animal (this time, beetles). When the soldiers commit the unnatural act of a massive battle against their own species, they wound each other and become more animalistic in their movements and appearance. While the boy's father imagines war as a battle of civilization against the "savage," the story shows war as something that undoes civilization, that reduces men to the level of the beetle. The "strange red light" is a fire—the battle has started a conflagration; now that conflagration is growing. War destroys nature through fire, but nature reacts with more destruction through that same fire.

The narrator notes that the ground is littered with broken rifles, bedrolls, and knapsacks—the sorts of things associated with retreating soldiers, of troops who are "flying from their hunters." But again, the child does not make these associations.

This is another moment where the narrator forces the reader to confront the reality of war even though the child cannot. The inclusion of details that the child does not note makes the child's misperception of violence in the story a major, conspicuous feature. The description of the retreating soldiers as escaping their "hunters" again blurs the line between human and nature, and in that comparison casts a harsh light on both the destruction of men by other men, and nature by men.

The narrator reveals that a few hours before, a battle had occurred between thousands of soldiers, and the boy had slept through it all, grasping his **sword** "with perhaps a tighter clutch in unconscious sympathy with his martial environment." In fact, the battle was so close to the boy that the soldiers almost trampled him as he slept, but still he did not wake up. The narrator comments that the sleeping boy was as "heedless of the grandeur of the struggle as the dead who had died to make the glory."

The narrator continues to provide specific details about the reality of the battle that the child is not privy to. The boy, though surrounded by war, is unaware of its reality. That the boy could sleep through the battle continues to raise the question of just what is going on with this child—no one is that sound a sleeper. But the narrator continues to hold those details back, and in doing so the reader comes to think of the child as being ridiculous and monstrous and uncaring. But, once again, the narrator then takes that sense of the child and uses it to condemn the adult world, in this case by comparing the child's "heedlessness" with that of the soldiers who went into this battle influenced by the idea of the "grandeur" of war and are now, merely, dead. The child's misperceptions about war might be exacerbated by his age, but they are mirrored by his entire society.

The fire at the edge of the woods now glows everywhere, its light reflected back down by its own hovering smoke. The water of the stream toward which the soldiers are headed gleams red with reflected firelight, and some stones in the stream are red with blood. The soldiers who reach the stream plunge in their heads to drink. Some are too weak to lift their heads again and drown. These men look headless, and the child regards them with wonder. The boy, still leading the soldiers, smiles and encourages them onward by pointing his **sword** toward the "guiding light" of the fire on the other side of the stream.

Once again, the narrator heightens the tension between what the child perceives and what the reader perceives. The child believes he is leading a group of soldiers onward in a battle, but in reality the battle is already over and the soldiers are dying. The child believes the fire is a guiding light towards which he can lead his soldiers, but in reality the fire is a remnant of the battle that is now raging out of control. The battle has destroyed and soiled nature, as marked by the blood-stained rocks, raging fire, and the forest floor littered with the discarded gear of fleeing soldiers.

The boy emerges from the forest and is awed and excited by the tremendous fire. Leaving the soldiers behind, he climbs a fence, runs across a field, and finds the blazing ruin of a dwelling. The boy is delighted by the desolation. He can't see a single living thing around him, but "he cared nothing for that; the spectacle pleased, and he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames." He runs around trying to collect fuel to feed the fire, but everything he finds is too heavy for him to handle. So, "in despair," he flings in his **toy sword**, "a surrender to the superior forces of nature." The narrator comments that the boy's "military career is at an end."

The boy's father and ancestors saw themselves as conquering nature and other people in order to bring civilization and proper order. They subdued and enslaved the land and "savages," because that was their right as the bringers of civilization. Yet in this scene the boy is completely and totally in awe of the pure destructive force of the fire. He wants to be a part of that destructive power. Throwing his sword into the fire is a kind of sacrifice of his ideals of war—that it is glorious, just, and fun—to the reality that he just likes power, destroying things, and being part of an overwhelming force. When the boy throws his sword into the fire, the narrator comments that the boy is surrendering to "the superior forces of nature," which draws attention to two things. First, the fact that even though the fire started because of the battle, the spread of fire is a natural process that is not manmade. Second, though, the child can be read as surrendering to human nature—to the inherent desire for mastery, power, and destruction that is a part of all men, and underlies all war. *When the child throws his sword in the fire, he ends his military career—his elaborate, delusional game of war has come to an end in the face of the brutal reality of a desire to destroy. And the story implies that all military careers are similarly just veneers that will similarly come to an end in lust for destruction.*

The boy then sees some outbuildings in the distance that look strangely familiar, as if he has seen them before in a dream. He looks at them for a moment, trying to figure out what they are, when suddenly he realizes he is looking at his own home, burning. He is momentarily stunned, then he runs, stumbling, around the buildings He sees the dead body of a white woman. She is face up, her hands thrown out, her clothing "deranged," and her forehead is torn away, her brain spills out of a hole in her head, and her hair is tangled with clotted blood. She has been shot in the head.

The boy's inability to recognize his own home highlights the difference between his perception of events and their reality, the level of destruction that has occurred, and perhaps the child's own loss of himself to the desire to destroy. When the child does realize what has happened, he is forced to face reality. When he finds his own mother dead, he reacts in a completely different way than he reacted when he saw dead and dying soldiers in the forest. What he thought was a glorious game was in fact brutal destruction. He thought he was an instrument of destruction, but it was always going to rebound against him. Meanwhile, the details of the dead mother are gruesome: a suggestion of rape in the "deranged" clothes, tangled hair and clotted blood, oozing brain. Just as the child is forced to face the reality of war, the story ensures that the reader, too, must face it. The story is not just a comeuppance for the child; it is meant to shock and disgust the reader, to make the reader too feel the reality of war—and to realize that the child is not the only one who had no actual conception of war's brutality.

The child waves his hands in "wild, uncertain gestures." He "utters a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey—a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil." The narrator reveals that the child is deaf and mute. The child stands motionless with quivering lips and stares down at "the wreck."

After comparing the child to an animal and further confusing the borders between humanity and nature, the narrator finally reveals that the child is deaf and mute. This revelation explains quite a bit of the child's behavior through the story: this is why he slept through the war, why he couldn't understand that the men were injured soldiers, and so on. But throughout the story, the narrator has connected the child's behavior to that of his family, ancestors, and society. The revelation that the child can't hear or talk removes some of his responsibility for his actions, but it places even more *responsibility on the family and society that molded him. The child, being unable to interact with reality as most other people can, can be forgiven for not understanding the reality of war. But the society that taught him these misperceptions of war as glorious, of destruction as fun, can't be let off the hook. The child's final act in the story is to simply stare down at "the wreck", finally forced to confront the reality that he has failed to see throughout the story. In this way, the story suggests that those who fail to grapple with the brutal realities of war—and of the ethos that glorifies conquering and enslaving both nature and other men—will inevitably lead to their own death and destruction.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

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Vance, Caitlin. "*Chickamauga*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Mar 2021. Web. 18 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Vance, Caitlin. "*Chickamauga*." LitCharts LLC, March 18, 2021. Retrieved March 18, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/chickamauga.

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Bierce, Ambrose. Chickamauga. Dover Thrift Editions. 1994.

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Bierce, Ambrose. Chickamauga. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions. 1994.