The Boarded Window

by Ambrose Bierce

QW: Describe what you think it was like in Sparta in 1830, almost 200 years ago.

1. Read paragraph 1. Write a few sentences comparing your idea of what it was like in Sparta in 1830 to Bierce’s description of Ohio in 1830.
2. Bierce uses some words you probably don’t know. Underline those words in the story as you read.
3. How does Bierce create an atmosphere or mood of horror and fear? Circle a few words and phrases from the text that help create this mood.
4. Complete a characterization chart for Murlock.
5. The story ends with a description. What does the reader learn from this description? Why does the author reveal it in this way? (Hint: Think about how you would feel if he just told you what happened instead of letting you figure it out.)

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| In 1830, only a few miles away from what is now the great city of Cincinnati, lay an immense and almost unbroken forest. The whole region was sparsely settled by people of the frontier - restless souls who no sooner had hewn fairly habitable homes out of the wilderness and attained to that degree of prosperity which today we should call indigence, than, impelled by some mysterious impulse of their nature, they abandoned all and pushed farther westward, to encounter new perils and privations in the effort to regain the meagre comforts which they had voluntarily renounced. Many of them had already forsaken that region for the remoter settlements, but among those remaining was one who had been of those first arriving. He lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest, of whose gloom and silence he seemed a part, for no one had ever known him to smile nor speak a needless word. His simple wants were supplied by the sale or barter of skins of wild animals in the river town, for not a thing did he grow upon the land which, if needful, he might have claimed by right of undisturbed possession. There were evidences of "improvement" - a few acres of ground immediately about the house had once been cleared of its trees, the decayed stumps of which were half concealed by the new growth that had been suffered to repair the ravage wrought by the axe. Apparently the man's zeal for agriculture had burned with a failing flame, expiring in penitential ashes.     The little log house, with its chimney of sticks, its roof of warping clapboards weighted with traversing poles and its "chinking" of clay, had a single door and, directly opposite, a window. The latter, however, was boarded up - nobody could remember a time when it was not. And none knew why it was so closed; certainly not because of the occupant's dislike of light and air, for on those rare occasions when a hunter had passed that lonely spot the recluse had commonly been seen sunning himself on his doorstep if heaven had provided sunshine for his need. I fancy there are few persons living today who ever knew the secret of that window, but I am one, as you shall see.     The man's name was said to be Murlock. He was apparently seventy years old, actually about fifty. Something besides years had had a hand in his ageing. His hair and long, full beard were white, his grey, lustreless eyes sunken, his face singularly seamed with wrinkles which appeared to belong to two intersecting systems. In figure he was tall and spare, with a stoop of the shoulders - a burden bearer. I never saw him; these particulars I learned from my grandfather, from whom also I got the man's story when I was a lad. He had known him when living near by in that early day.     One day Murlock was found in his cabin, dead. It was not a time and place for coroners and newspapers, and I suppose it was agreed that he had died from natural causes or I should have been told, and should remember. I know only that with what was probably a sense of the fitness of things the body was buried near the cabin, alongside the grave of his wife, who had preceded him by so many years that local tradition had retained hardly a hint of her existence. That closes the final chapter of this true story - excepting, indeed, the circumstance that many years afterward, in company with an equally intrepid spirit, I penetrated to the place and ventured near enough to the ruined cabin to throw a stone against it, and ran away to avoid the ghost which every well-informed boy thereabout knew haunted the spot. But there is an earlier chapter - that supplied by my grandfather.     When Murlock built his cabin and began laying sturdily about with his axe to hew out a farm - the rifle, meanwhile, his means of support - he was young, strong and full of hope. In that eastern country whence he came he had married, as was the fashion, a young woman in all ways worthy of his honest devotion, who shared the dangers and privations of his lot with a willing spirit and light heart. There is no known record of her name; of her charms of mind and person tradition is silent and the doubter is at liberty to entertain his doubt; but God forbid that I should share it! Of their affection and happiness there is abundant assurance in every added day of the man's widowed life; for what but the magnetism of a blessed memory could have chained that venturesome spirit to a lot like that?     One day Murlock returned from gunning in a distant part of the forest to find his wife prostrate with fever, and delirious. There was no physician within miles, no neighbour; nor was she in a condition to be left, to summon help. So he set about the task of nursing her back to health, but at the end of the third day she fell into unconsciousness and so passed away, apparently, with never a gleam of returning reason.     From what we know of a nature like his we may venture to sketch in some of the details of the outline picture drawn by my grandfather. When convinced that she was dead, Murlock had sense enough to remember that the dead must be prepared for burial. In performance of this sacred duty he blundered now and again, did certain things incorrectly, and others which he did correctly were done over and over. His occasional failures to accomplish some simple and ordinary act filled him with astonishment, like that of a drunken man who wonders at the suspension of familiar natural laws. He was surprised, too, that he did not weep - surprised and a little ashamed; surely it is unkind not to weep for the dead. "Tomorrow," he said aloud, "I shall have to make the coffin and dig the grave; and then I shall miss her, when she is no longer in sight; but now - she is dead, of course, but it is all right - it must be all right, somehow. Things cannot be so bad as they seem."     He stood over the body in the fading light, adjusting the hair and putting the finishing touches to the simple toilet, doing all mechanically, with soulless care. And still through his consciousness ran an undersense of conviction that all was right - that he should have her again as before, and everything explained. He had had no experience in grief; his capacity had not been enlarged by use. His heart could not contain it all, nor his imagination rightly conceive it. He did not know he was so hard struck; that knowledge would come later, and never go. Grief is an artist of powers as various as the instruments upon which he plays his dirges for the dead, evoking from some the sharpest, shrillest notes, from others the low, grave chords that throb recurrent like the slow beating of a distant drum. Some natures it startles; some it stupefies. To one it comes like the stroke of an arrow, stinging all the sensibilities to a keener life; to another as the blow of a bludgeon, which in crushing benumbs. We may conceive Murlock to have been that way affected, for (and here we are upon surer ground than that of conjecture) no sooner had he finished his pious work than, sinking into a chair by the side of the table upon which the body lay, and noting how white the profile showed in the deepening gloom, he laid his arms upon the table's edge, and dropped his face into them, tearless yet and unutterably weary. At that moment came in through the open window a long, wailing sound like the cry of a lost child in the far deeps of the darkening woods! But the man did not move. Again, and nearer than before, sounded that unearthly cry upon his failing sense. Perhaps it was a wild beast; perhaps it was a dream. For Murlock was asleep.     Some hours later, as it afterward appeared, this unfaithful watcher awoke and lifting his head from his arms intently listened - he knew not why. There in the black darkness by the side of the dead, recalling all without a shock, he strained his eyes to see - he knew not what. His senses were all alert, his breath was suspended, his blood had stilled its tides as if to assist the silence. Who - what had waked him, and where was it?     Suddenly the table shook beneath his arms, and at the same moment he heard, or fancied that he heard, a light, soft step - another - sounds as of bare feet upon the floor!     He was terrified beyond the power to cry out or move. Perforce he waited - waited there in the darkness through seeming centuries of such dread as one may know, yet live to tell. He tried vainly to speak the dead woman's name, vainly to stretch forth his hand across the table to learn if she were there. His throat was powerless, his arms and hands were like lead. Then occurred something most frightful. Some heavy body seemed hurled against the table with an impetus that pushed it against his breast so sharply as nearly to overthrow him, and at the same instant he heard and felt the fall of something upon the floor with so violent a thump that the whole house was shaken by the impact. A scuffling ensued, and a confusion of sounds impossible to describe. Murlock had risen to his feet. Fear had by excess forfeited control of his faculties. He flung his hands upon the table. Nothing was there!     There is a point at which terror may turn to madness; and madness incites to action. With no definite intent, from no motive but the wayward impulse of a madman, Murlock sprang to the wall, with a little groping seized his loaded rifle, and without aim discharged it. By the flash which lit up the room with a vivid illumination, he saw an enormous panther dragging the dead woman toward the window, its teeth fixed in her throat! Then there were darkness blacker than before, and silence; and when he returned to consciousness the sun was high and the wood vocal with songs of birds.     The body lay near the window, where the beast had left it when frightened away by the flash and report of the rifle. The clothing was deranged, the long hair in disorder, the limbs lay anyhow. From the throat, dreadfully lacerated, had issued a pool of blood not yet entirely coagulated. The ribbon with which he had bound the wrists was broken; the hands were tightly clenched. Between the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear.Easier-to-read version of**The Boarded Window** by Ambrose BierceAudio of this version is available at http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/1978141.htmlIn 1830, only a few miles away from what is now the great city of Cincinnati, Ohio, lay a huge and almost endless forest.The area had a few settlements established by people of the frontier. Many of them had already left the area for settlements further to the west. But among those remaining was a man who had been one of the first people to arrive there.He lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest. He seemed a part of the darkness and silence of the forest, for no one had ever known him to smile or speak an unnecessary word. His simple needs were supplied by selling or trading the skins of wild animals in the town.His little log house had a single door. Directly opposite was a window. The window was boarded up. No one could remember a time when it was not. And no one knew why it had been closed. I imagine there are few people living today who ever knew the secret of that window. But I am one, as you shall see.The man's name was said to be Murlock. He appeared to be seventy years old, but he was really fifty. Something other than years had been the cause of his aging.His hair and long, full beard were white. His gray, lifeless eyes were sunken. His face was wrinkled. He was tall and thin with drooping shoulders—like someone with many problems.I never saw him. These details I learned from my grandfather. He told me the man's story when I was a boy. He had known him when living nearby in that early day.One day Murlock was found in his cabin, dead. It was not a time and place for medical examiners and newspapers. I suppose it was agreed that he had died from natural causes or I should have been told, and should remember.I know only that the body was buried near the cabin, next to the burial place of his wife. She had died so many years before him that local tradition noted very little of her existence.That closes the final part of this true story, except for the incident that followed many years later. With a fearless spirit I went to the place and got close enough to the ruined cabin to throw a stone against it. I ran away to avoid the ghost which every well-informed boy in the area knew haunted the spot.But there is an earlier part to this story supplied by my grandfather.When Murlock built his cabin he was young, strong and full of hope. He began the hard work of creating a farm. He kept a gun--a rifle—for hunting to support himself.He had married a young woman, in all ways worthy of his honest love and loyalty. She shared the dangers of life with a willing spirit and a light heart. There is no known record of her name or details about her. They loved each other and were happy.One day Murlock returned from hunting in a deep part of the forest. He found his wife sick with fever and confusion. There was no doctor or neighbor within miles. She was in no condition to be left alone while he went to find help. So Murlock tried to take care of his wife and return her to good health. But at the end of the third day she fell into unconsciousness and died.From what we know about a man like Murlock, we may try to imagine some of the details of the story told by my grandfather.When he was sure she was dead, Murlock had sense enough to remember that the dead must be prepared for burial. He made a mistake now and again while performing this special duty. He did certain things wrong. And others which he did correctly were done over and over again.He was surprised that he did not cry — surprised and a little ashamed. Surely it is unkind not to cry for the dead."Tomorrow," he said out loud, "I shall have to make the coffin and dig the grave; and then I shall miss her, when she is no longer in sight. But now -- she is dead, of course, but it is all right — it must be all right, somehow. Things cannot be as bad as they seem."He stood over the body of his wife in the disappearing light. He fixed the hair and made finishing touches to the rest. He did all of this without thinking but with care. And still through his mind ran a feeling that all was right -- that he should have her again as before, and everything would be explained.Murlock had no experience in deep sadness. His heart could not contain it all. His imagination could not understand it. He did not know he was so hard struck. That knowledge would come later and never leave.Deep sadness is an artist of powers that affects people in different ways. To one it comes like the stroke of an arrow, shocking all the emotions to a sharper life. To another, it comes as the blow of a crushing strike. We may believe Murlock to have been affected that way.Soon after he had finished his work he sank into a chair by the side of the table upon which the body lay. He noted how white his wife's face looked in the deepening darkness. He laid his arms upon the table's edge and dropped his face into them, tearless and very sleepy.At that moment a long, screaming sound came in through the open window. It was like the cry of a lost child in the far deep of the darkening forest! But the man did not move. He heard that unearthly cry upon his failing sense, again and nearer than before. Maybe it was a wild animal or maybe it was a dream. For Murlock was asleep.Some hours later, he awoke, lifted his head from his arms and listened closely. He knew not why. There in the black darkness by the side of the body, he remembered everything without a shock. He strained his eyes to see -- he knew not what.His senses were all alert. His breath was suspended. His blood was still as if to assist the silence. Who — what had awakened him and where was it!Suddenly the table shook under his arms. At the same time he heard, or imagined he heard, a light, soft step and then another. The sounds were as bare feet walking upon the floor!He was afraid beyond the power to cry out or move. He waited—waited there in the darkness through what seemed like centuries of such fear. Fear as one may know, but yet live to tell. He tried but failed to speak the dead woman's name. He tried but failed to stretch his hand across the table to learn if she was there. His throat was powerless. His arms and hands were like lead.Then something most frightful happened. It seemed as if a heavy body was thrown against the table with a force that pushed against his chest. At the same time he heard and felt the fall of something upon the floor. It was so violent a crash that the whole house shook. A fight followed and a confusion of sounds impossible to describe.Murlock had risen to his feet. Extreme fear had caused him to lose control of his senses. He threw his hands upon the table. Nothing was there!There is a point at which fear may turn to insanity; and insanity incites to action. With no definite plan and acting like a madman, Murlock ran quickly to the wall. He seized his loaded rifle and without aim fired it.The flash from the rifle lit the room with a clear brightness. He saw a huge fierce panther dragging the dead woman toward the window. The wild animal's teeth were fixed on her throat! Then there was darkness blacker than before, and silence.When he returned to consciousness the sun was high and the forest was filled with the sounds of singing birds. The body lay near the window, where the animal had left it when frightened away by the light and sound of the rifle.The clothing was ruined. The long hair was in disorder. The arms and legs lay in a careless way. And a pool of blood flowed from the horribly torn throat. The ribbon he had used to tie the wrists was broken. The hands were tightly closed.And between the teeth was a piece of the animal's ear. |
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