An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge Study Guide

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge by Ambrose Bierce

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is one of the most widely anthologized American short stories and is considered Ambrose Bierce's best work of short fiction. First published in Bierce's short story collection *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891, the story centers on Peyton Farquhar, a southern planter who, while not a Confederate Soldier, is about to be hanged by the Union Army for attempting to destroy the railroad bridge at Owl Creek. As Farquhar stands on the bridge with a noose around his neck, Bierce leads the reader to believe that the rope breaks and that Farquhar falls into the water below, only to escape to his farm, where he is reunited with his wife. It is revealed at the end of the story, however, that Farquhar has, in fact, been hanged and that these imaginings took place in the seconds before his death. While "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has been occasionally faulted for what some critics consider its gimmicky ending, it has nonetheless been lauded as an example of technical brilliance and innovative narration as well as for its examination of such themes as the nature of time and the complexities of human cognition.

Author Biography

Ambrose Bierce was born in 1842 in Meigs County, Ohio. His parents were farmers, and he was the tenth of thirteen children, all of whom were given names beginning with "A." In 1846 the family moved to Indiana, where Bierce attended primary and secondary school. He entered the Kentucky Military Institute in 1859 and at the outbreak of the Civil War enlisted in the Union Army, serving in such units as the Ninth Indiana Infantry Regiment and Buell's Army of the Ohio. Bierce fought in numerous military engagements, including the battles of Shiloh and Chickamauga and in Sherman's March to the Sea. After the war, Bierce traveled with a military expedition to San Francisco, where he left the army in 1867.

Bierce's early poetry and prose appeared in the Caiifornian magazine. In 1868 he was hired as the editor of the News Letter, for which he wrote his famous "Town Crier" column. Bierce became a noted figure in California literary society, establishing friendships with Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Joaquin Miller. In 1872 Bierce moved to England, where during a three-year stay he wrote for *Fun and Figaro* magazines and acquired the nickname "Bitter Bierce." His first three book of sketches, *Nuggets and Dust Panned Out in California* (1872), *The Fiend's Delight* (1873), and *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull* (1874) were published during this period. He returned to San Francisco and worked in a government mint office for one year before becoming associate editor of the *Argonaut*.

Bierce worked for a mining company in South Dakota for two years, but he returned to the city in 1881 to become editor of the weekly *Wasp*. In 1887 Bierce began writing for media mogul William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner*, continuing the "Prattler" column he had done for the *Argonaut* and *Wasp*. This provided him with a regular outlet for his essays, epigrams, and many of the short stories subsequently collected in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891 and *Can Such Things Be?* in 1893. A committed opponent of hypocrisy, prejudice, and corruption, Bierce acquired fame as a journalist, becoming an admired but often hated public figure, a man of contradiction and mystery. In 1914 he informed some of his correspondents that he intended to travel to Mexico to join Poncho Villa's forces as an observer during that country's civil war. He was never heard from again, and the circumstances of his death are uncertain.

Plot Summary

Upon a railroad bridge in Alabama, a man is waiting to be hanged. His hands are tied behind his back, and a rope encircles his neck. He stands upon a platform constructed of loose boards. Members of the Federal Army—the Union Army during the Civil War—are also on the bridge. Some are completing the preparations and some are guarding the bridge. The man about to be hanged, Peyton Farquhar, is a civilian.

On one side of the stream is a forest, on the other a fort. Halfway between the bridge and the fort stand a line of soldiers, all armed. When the soldiers finish their preparations, they move off of the bridge. A sergeant stands at the opposite end of the same board as Farquhar. At the signal from his captain, he will step off the board. The board will tilt down, and Farquhar will fall through the railway ties.

Farquhar closes his eyes to think of his family but he is distracted by a sharp, rhythmic sound. He tries to figure out what it is and how far away it is. He finds he is waiting with impatience and apprehension for the toll, which seems to come less frequently. The sound is so loud that it hurts his ears. What he hears is only the ticking of his watch. Farquhar opens his eyes and looks at the stream. He thinks that if he could free his hands he might be able to dive into the water and swim away from his executioners. He would then flee for home, which is still outside of the territory held by the Union Army, As he is thinking, the sergeant steps off of the board.

The narrative then flashes back to Farquhar and the circumstances that led to his hanging. Though he was a Southern plantation owner, he was unable to serve in combat. Still he longed for the glory of a soldier's service and waited for the chance to prove that he possessed courage. One evening, a Confederate soldier stopped at the plantation, and Farquhar asked for news of the war: The Yankees were pushing forward. The soldier told him that they were repairing the railroads and had built a fort near the Owl Creek bridge. The Yankee commander had issued an order to hang any civilian caught interfering with the railroad. Farquhar asked about the bridge, and the soldier put in his mind how easily the bridge would burn. An hour later, the soldier passed the plantation again, heading north. He was returning to Yankee territory, for he was a scout for the Union Army.

The narrative returns to the present as Peyton Farquhar falls between the railway ties of the bndge, losing consciousness. The sharp pain in his neck and a feeling of suffocation return him to a state of awareness. He is incapable of rational thought. Then he splashes into the stream, and he is again able to think. He knows that the rope has broken. His body sinks toward the bottom of the stream. Without realizing it, he starts to free his hands, which then loosen the rope at his neck. His hands drive him to the surface of the water. After a breath of air, he finds he has an amazing awareness of his surroundings: he can feel each ripple of water, see the colors shining in the dewdrops on the grass, hear the body of a fish parting the water. He also sees the fort and the soldiers, shouting and pointing at him. A bullet strikes the water inches from his face and he hears the orders to fire.

He dives under the water, under a hail of bullets. When he resurfaces, he is further downstream. He knows he must get out of the soldiers' range soon because the officer will give his soldiers the order to fire at will. They even fire a cannonball at him. Fortunately, the water throws him upon the bank opposite from the fort. He runs into the forest and travels all day. At nightfall he stumbles upon a road that leads him in the direction of his home. It is a wide road, yet eerily empty with no one is traveling on it nor fields or homes alongside it.

His throat, his eyes, and his tongue are all swollen. Despite his suffering, he continues walking. He believes he has fallen asleep while walking, for he finds he is at the gate of his own home. His wife is on the veranda to meet him. As he is about to embrace her, he feels a sharp blow on the back of his neck. He sees a bright white light, and then there is blackness. Peyton Farquhar has died. His body, the neck broken, swings beneath the timbers of Owl Creek bridge.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

The story opens with a man standing on a railroad bridge, somewhere in northern Alabama, sometime during the American Civil War. The man is fixed to the spot, because his neck is in a noose. The man's hands are tied behind his back, and he is looking down into the water below. The rope around his neck is attached to a cross timber over his head. The footing is comprised of some slack boards, laid upon the railway supports. Four other men share this platform with him: two privates, a sergeant, and a captain, all from the Federal army. At either end of the bridge stand two sentinels. These two men do not appear to have anything to do with the impending execution. They simply block the ends of the bridge.

The only spectators are from a single company of infantry, in line at parade rest. A lieutenant stands to their right. With the exception of the four men on the platform, there is no movement at all. The infantrymen just stare motionless at the scene in front of them. The sentinels are even more detached from the scene and could have been statues adorning the ends of the bridge. According to their unwritten code, death is a dignitary and is to be received with military etiquette and silence.

The man who is about to be hanged is a civilian; a nice looking man of about thirty five years of age. The man's well-fitting frockcoat indicates he has been successful, probably a planter. The man's large, gray eyes have a kindly look to them, something unexpected from someone in such a position. Clearly, this was no common criminal, but military law makes provisions for hanging offenders, and gentlemen are no exception.

Everything was ready now. The two privates step aside, and each pull away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant salutes the captain and moves behind him. The two men then move apart, one step. This leaves one plank to span three of the cross ties of the bridge. The man in the noose stands at one end of the plank and the sergeant at the other. A fourth plank in place almost reaches the end of the condemned man's plank, but not quite. So now, the only thing holding the critical plank in place is the weight of the sergeant. When it is time, the captain will give the signal, the sergeant will step off the plank, which will then tilt, and the man will fall, hanging him instantly.

This seems to be an efficient system from the perspective of the man in the noose. The man can see everything, because his eyes have not been blindfolded, and he wears no hood. The man looks for a few moments at his precarious footing, and then to the water below. The man focuses on a piece of driftwood and makes a note to himself that it seems to be moving very slowly.

The man then closes his eyes and thinks of his wife and children, and then his concentration is averted to something else… a sharp, metallic sound, like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer. The man wonders what it could be and waits for each strike with

apprehension. The sound becomes maddening to him, and he feels as though his ears are being punctured with a knife. The man thinks he will scream until he realizes that the sound is the ticking of his watch. The man opens his eyes again and thinks that if he can just free his hands, he can rip off the noose, dive into the water and swim away. While these thoughts swirl in his head, the captain nods to the sergeant, and he steps aside.

Part 1 Analysis

This is a very intriguing beginning to this story. We know it takes place during the Civil War, but it is not clear what the date is or the exact location; just somewhere in northern Alabama. The execution structure is unusual, and it seems great pains have been taken to create it, as opposed to using more typical methods. Why was it built this way and is there any significance to it being held on a bridge? More importantly, what crime has this man committed? The man is obviously a well heeled, Southern gentleman with a family, not a typical candidate for execution.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

The planter's name is Peyton Farquhar, from an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner, he is also a secessionist and devoted to the Southern cause, although circumstances kept him from enlisting. Peyton longs for the distinction and honor of a soldier's life and does anything he can to further the cause.

One evening, while he and his wife are sitting on a bench outside their home, they are approached by a soldier in a grey uniform, who asks for a drink of water. Mrs. Farquhar is happy to oblige, and the two men engage in conversation about news from the front. The soldier tells him the Yanks are repairing the railroads in preparation for another advance. They have already reached the Owl Creek Bridge and have even built a stockade there. In addition, they have posted notices that any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels, or trains, will be hanged.

Peyton asks a few more questions about the distance to the bridge and how it is guarded. Peyton then goes so far as to ask what a man could do if he were able to elude the guards posted there. The soldier thinks for a minute, and then tells him a flood from last winter had deposited a great amount of driftwood against the pier at this end of the bridge. Surely it will be dry as a bone by now and will burn instantly.

The soldier drinks his water, thanks them for their hospitality and leaves. An hour later, when it is dark, the same man rides past the house again, going northward this time, in the direction from which he came. He is a Federal scout.

Part 2 Analysis

We learn a little bit more about the condemned man in this section. The reason is not given, but we understand he is unable to join the military. He longs to be of service and to share in the glory of the cause and does whatever he can. All the pieces start to fit together, too, about what his crime may have been in relation to the bridge. After we learn the soldier in gray is really a Federal scout, it makes one wonder if he had been watched and targeted or if this were a random visit? At any rate, the reader can feel Peyton's passions are aroused and something ominous is about to take place.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

When Peyton falls through the bridge, he loses consciousness and appears dead. It is from this state that he awakes from a sharp pressure upon his throat and a sense that he is suffocating. Every fiber in his body is screaming in pain. The intellectual part of him is gone; he has the power to feel and that is all. That is enough. He feels his body swing like a big pendulum in a cloud.

Then suddenly, the light that has surrounded him disappears at the same time he hears a big splash, followed by a ringing in his ears. Everything has gone cold and dark. When his power of thought returns, he knows the rope has broken, and he is in the stream below the bridge. The noose, now wet, continues to strangle him, and he thinks of the irony of being hanged below water. He can see the gleam of light above him, and his hands struggle to free his neck of its bonds.

Peyton's neck aches horribly when the rope is removed, and a part of him screams to have it put back. His body is in excruciating pain. Peyton's heart, which had been merely fluttering, now wants to jump out of his mouth. When he surfaces, everything is so clear to him. Peyton sees the veins on the leaves of all the trees in the nearby forest; sees the spiders crawling on their webs; even the dragonflies' wings make a beautiful music to him.

However, he also sees the soldiers who had tried to execute him have located him in the water and are pointing at him. They begin to shoot. Peyton hears the sharp noises and feels the pieces of metal in the water, and he knows they are bullets. Peyton dives as deep as he can. The water sounds, to him, like the rushing of Niagara, and he continues to feel the bullets coming after his body, but he just brushes them away.

When he is able to resurface, he notices that he is a little further downstream and surely he is out of Federal territory, and he will be safe. The intrusion of a cannonball near him puts him back on alert. Suddenly, he gets caught up in a vortex and starts spinning; all the objects he has been looking at are now just blurs of colors and shapes. After a few minutes, he is able to fling himself onto the riverbank, where he weeps with delight. A last shot from the cannon rouses him, and he scrambles up the riverbank into a forest.

The forest seems unending and maze-like, and he hasn't realized that he lives in such a wild region. It is night now, and he is starving and exhausted from walking all day. The only thing that keeps him going is the thought of his wife and children, who will be waiting for him. At last, he finds a road that he knows will take him home. There are no fields nearby and no houses or buildings. The trees rise dark and tall and seem to create a perspective, terminating at a point on the horizon. Overhead, great, golden stars form strange constellations, which he takes to have a secret, evil significance.

While he moves through the woods, he hears many distinct noises, among which, he swears to hear whispers in an unknown tongue.

Peyton's neck is now in severe pain and horribly swollen. Peyton knows it must be black from where the rope had been, and his eyes are so swollen that he cannot close them any longer. Amazingly, the roadway seems as though it has been carpeted—it is so soft he can no longer feel it beneath his feet.

Peyton must be sleeping while he walks, because when he wakes, he is standing at the gate of his own home. It is a bright and beautiful morning. When he moves up the wide walkway, he is aware of the flutter of feminine garments, and then he sees his wife coming down from the veranda to meet him. His wife holds out her arms to him, smiling with such grace and dignity. She is so beautiful that he cannot stop himself from reaching out and touching her. When he is about to embrace her, he feels a wicked blow at the back of his neck. An intense, white light blocks out everything around him and he hears something that sounds like a cannon. Then everything is dark and silent.

Peyton Farquhar is dead and he swings slowly, like a pendulum, beneath the Owl Creek Bridge.

Part 3 Analysis

It seems that this part of the story has two parts, the first of which blends into the second. It starts out with Peyton imagining what would happen if he were to break free of the rope and drop into the water. It is like he is imagining, at this point, that this is still a possibility. Peyton uses logic to think about what his body would feel like, and he knows the soldiers would try to shoot him once he is submerged in the water.

It is at this point that the scenario becomes a bit surreal. Peyton sees intricate details of his surroundings. Colors and sounds are more intense. Even the sand on the riverbank is like precious jewels to him. It is like he is having a near death experience, where everything supposedly becomes more vibrant. Then he finds himself on a road, with no humans anywhere, only the whispers in a strange dialect.

The trees create a tunnel for him and the stars become a light, beckoning him on, even though their pattern is unfamiliar to him. Peyton can no longer feel the road beneath his feet, and it makes sense that this is the moment when his physical body is no longer standing on the planks.

Peyton then sees his home, particularly brilliant in the morning sun, and sees the flutter of women's garments, which seem to indicate he is in some heavenly state, and the angels are surrounding him. The most beautiful angel of all, of course, is his lovely wife, who extends her arms to him. Petyon loses the vision of her, just as the rope actually snaps his physical neck.

So, it could have been the hysterically lucid dreams of a frantic man about to die, or perhaps, Peyton has had an out-of-body experience and all his senses were more alive just before the point of his mortal death. Or maybe a little bit of both.

Characters

Peyton Farquhar is a Southern planter of about thirty-five years of age who has been apprehended by the Union Army for attempting to destroy the railroad bridge at Owl Creek. It is this crime for which he is about to be hanged. Farquhar is a prosperous farmer and slave owner from an old and respected Alabama family. While he has been prevented from becoming a Confederate soldier for unknown reasons, it is nonetheless stated that there was "no service too humble for him to perform in aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake." Because he dies at the end of the story, Farquhar is sometimes considered a sympathetic and brave character, but many have found him to be callous, foolhardy, and obsessed with honor.

Themes

Time

Bierce uses a complex narrative structure to advance the theme of time in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." He distorts the reader's sense of time by revealing at the end of the story that Farquhar imagined his escape in the few seconds before he died even though the escape takes up a great portion of the narrative. By doing so, Bierce addresses the ways time can be portrayed and manipulated in fiction, a medium in which the reader is often reliant on the author to represent or create reality. Bierce also stresses that time is subjective and phenomenal, especially during times of mental or emotional duress.

Death and Dying

Bierce also examines the human desire to escape or cheat death and speculates what occurs physically and psychologically at the time of death. Although Farquhar's situation is quite grave—he is standing on a bridge with a noose around his neck as numerous Union soldiers stand guard—a part of him holds out hope that he can escape the situation and, therefore, mortality. By not allowing Farquhar to escape, Bierce emphasizes that death is unavoidable no matter how much people long to avoid it.

Bierce also provides a detailed description of what a person could experience at the moment of death. Farquhar transfers the physical realities of his hanging—the falling from the bridge, the snapping of the neck, the swinging on the rope—to an imagined scenario. In this hallucinatory state, his senses are heightened to such a level that he believes he can hear spiders gliding across the water, see a million blades of grass, and hear the beating of dragon flies' wings. It is unclear, however, if these sensations are a physical or psychological response to death.

Deception

Bierce addresses deception on a variety of levels in the story. Farquhar deceives himself into believing that it is possible to escape hanging, and he imagines that he does so. The reader, wanting to believe that Farquhar has managed to avoid death and achieve the glory he so wanted to attain, ignores clues throughout the narrative that Farquhar is hallucinating. Bierce contributes to this deception by using a complex narrative structure in which the reader is unsure as to who the narrator is and if that narrator is reliable. Bierce, who believed that fiction ought to challenge readers, once wrote that he detested "bad readers—readers who, lacking the habit of analysis, lack also the faculty of discrimination, and take whatever is put before them, with the broad, blind catholicity of a slop-fed conscience or a parlor pig." Finally, Farquhar, who is obsessed with "the opportunity for distinction," allows himself to be tricked by the Union soldier masquerading as a Confederate. The soldier merely has to suggest to Farquhar

that the bridge could easily be set on fire for him to attempt the deed. All of these deceptions are caused by people wanting to believe what is impossible or unlikely.

Dreams and Reality

Bierce also comments on the discrepancy between dreams and reality in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." In the story, Farquhar, who dreams of being a great war hero for the Confederacy, has a romantic and idealized view of war. When he is confronted with the brutality, deception, and violence of armed conflict, he fantasizes that he escapes and triumphantly returns to his family. Dreams, then, are presented as a way of coping with the harsh realities of life. However, through his telling of the story and his portrayal of Farquhar, Bierce seems to suggest that such fantasies and self-deceptions are cowardly and often have negative consequences.

Style

Structure and Narration

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is divided into three sections, with each section having its own distinct structure and narrative technique. In the first section, Bierce describes the setting of the execution up to the point the plank beneath Farquhar' s feet is removed. It is told from a conventional third-person point of view, with the narrator objectively describing the scene and relating the circumstances from outside the story. The second section provides background information on Farquhar, including how he came to commit the act for which he is about to be hanged. It is revealed that Farquhar was at home with his family when a soldier rode up and told him that the Union Army would soon be advancing across the Owl Creek bridge, which was vulnerable to attack. The soldier then told Farquhar that a great deal of driftwood had piled up against the bridge and that it could easily be set on fire. At the end of the section, the reader is told that the soldier was not a Confederate but rather a Union scout who has tried to provoke Farquhar into attempting to destroy the bridge. This section is also told from the third-person point of view, but it varies somewhat from the narration in the first section because some of Farquhar's perceptions are revealed. The third section picks up where the first section left off; then the rope around Farquhar's neck apparently breaks and he falls into the water. The viewpoint of the story suddenly shifts to a modified first-person point of view, and the reader is given access to Farquhar's thoughts and feelings as he attempts to escape. The narrator describes in great detail what is happening as Farquhar struggles to get out of the river, escape gun shots and cannon fire, and run through the wilderness to his house approximately thirty miles away. At the very end of the section, the story suddenly switches back to the third person and it is revealed that Farquhar is dead. Bierce's shifts in narration create a sense of disorientation in the reader because it is not always clear who is relating the story and if the narrator is reliable. This reflects Farquhar's own disorientation and allows the reader to take part in his hallucinations.

Satire

Bierce treats Farquhar as a satiric object in the story. Satire is a literary technique that uses ridicule, humor, or wit to criticize or provoke change in human nature or institutions. Bierce uses "indirect" satire; he relies on Farquhar's romantic notions of war to emphasize its brutal realities. Farquhar, who for some unknown reason was not allowed to become a Confederate soldier, believes that war is an "opportunity for distinction" and that "all is fair in love and war." He is obsessed with achieving honor and believes that battle would allow "the release of his energies." Because of these beliefs, Farquhar is a prime target for entrapment. The Union soldier merely has to suggest to him that Oak Creek bridge could easily be burned down. Seeing an opportunity for glory, Farquhar rushes off to commit the deed. However, even as he stands with a noose around his neck, he is unable to accept the realities of his

impending death. Instead, he imagines an extraordinary series of events during which he, in his mind, emerges a hero.

Language

Bierce uses figurative language—the opposite of literal language, in which every word is truthful, accurate, and free of exaggeration—to enhance the emotional impact of his story. He uses figurative language most extensively in the third section to give clues to the reader that Farquhar is hallucinating and becoming increasingly disoriented. In this section, the narrator's language is often melodramatic. For example, when Farquhar is in the river, fighting to break the rope around his wrists, the narrator declares: "What splendid effort!" and "What superhuman strength!" Additionally, the surroundings are described in the minutest detail, suggesting that Farquhar could not possibly be experiencing what is being described. For example, the narrator states that Farquhar "noted the prismatic colors in all the dew drops upon a million blades of grass," he heard "the beating of the dragon flies' wings," and he heard "the rush of [a fish] parting the water."

Bierce also uses alliteration—the repetition of consonant sounds—to make the language in this section sound unrealistic and hallucinatory: "He was now in full possession of his physical senses," "A piece of dancing Jriftwood," "HisAeart.. .Aad been fluttering ./aintly." Finally, Bierce uses meter—rhythmic language patterns—to create a singsong, dreamlike effect. For example, he uses iambs, a unit of words consisting of a repeating pattern of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable: "The trees' u-pon' the bank' were gi'-ant gar'-den plants'."

Historical Context

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" was published in 1891, though it is set during the Civil War. This war, which was fought from 1861 to 1865, claimed 525,000 American lives, the most American lives ever lost in a war. (Some 400,000 were lost in World War II.) The Civil War was a bloody conflict that began when the states of the American South withdrew from the Union, arguing that the U.S. Constitution gave them the right to do so if they chose. When President Abraham Lincoln disagreed with their decision and was determined to keep the union together, war broke out between the Northern States, still loyal to a single, united country, and the Southern States, which had formed their own confederacy, a loose association of member states.

Because the South had a much smaller population, and thus had far fewer soldiers, a decision was made in 1861 to organize guerrilla warfare against Union troops. These guerrillas would infiltrate camps behind the battlelines to disrupt the enemy's communications and supplies by blowing up bridges, capturing messengers, and burning stocks of ammunition and food. Civilians were organized into companies of rangers to wage guerrilla warfare against Union troops, while special units of the Confederate Army were created to act as hit-and-run raiders behind Union lines. Besides disrupting Union communications and supply lines, the guerrillas also forced the Union to deploy more troops behind the front, thus easing somewhat the overwhelming manpower advantage the North enjoyed. Among the groups of Southern guerrillas who harassed Union troops was Mosby's Rangers, a civilian force that struck such fear into the Union government that it was common policy each night to remove the planks from all bridges leading to Washington, DC, so that Mosby's Rangers could not enter the city. One of the South's most flamboyant military generals, Nathan Bedford Forrest, became famous for his leadership of behind-the-lines attacks by Confederate cavalry forces in Tennessee and Mississippi during General William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea.

Critical Overview

Critical reaction to "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has been mixed. While it continues to be a popular and frequently anthologized story, it has not received much serious scholarly attention. Some critics have dismissed it for what they consider its contrived ending, blatant sentimentality, reliance on sensationalism, and trivilization of death. Others have criticized Bierce for deceiving and playing with his readers. More recent critics, however, have reexamined the story and have concluded that it has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted and that it is, in fact, complex and innovative. FJ. Logan wrote in *American Literary Realism 1870-1910* that "the story has languished in anthologies, chiefly those used in secondary schools, perhaps because it has been so frequently offered as an action tale of extreme power written by an otherwise unfamiliar Civil War writer." He went on to say: "I am contending that 'Owl Creek Bridge' is not.. .some sort of hysterical gothic horripilator; it is, on the contrary, as tightly controlled and meticulously organized as any story is likely to be." In response to the accusation that Bierce played games with his readers, Harriet Kramer Linkin wrote in 1988 in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* that "Bierce manipulated the reader throughout [the story] but never lies outright.... The clues exceptional readers require to share Bierce's perspective are always available." Recent critics have also praised Bierce's focus on psychology and human cognition, particularly hallucinations and dreams.

Bierce's literary reputation is based primarily on his short stories of the Civil War, particularly "Chickamauga," "The Death of Halpin Frayser," and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Bierce's narrative methods have sometimes caused critics to view his works as little more than technical exercises. "Too many of his stories," David Weimer has stated, "lean too heavily on crafty mechanics, on a kind of literary gadgeteering." Yet, according to H.E. Bates, the structure of Bierce's stories is significant because "Bierce began to shorten the short story; he began to bring it to a sharper, more compressed method." While critics have both condemned and praised Bierce's imagination as among the most vicious and morbid in American literature, his works are counted among the most memorable* depictions of the precarious, ironic, and futile condition of human existence.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she sees "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge "as an early example of the portrayal of a character's inner psychology in fiction.

Ambrose Bierce may very well have been a man out of time. He was a cynical journalist writing at a time when social thought was dominated by optimism. He was the writer who introduced psychological studies in fiction into an American literary scene dominated by realism, naturalism, and regionalism. He was uncompromising in his refusal to bend to the requests of his publishers. Some people have seen his flight to Mexico in 1913 as his deliberate escape from living in that wrong time period. After finishing the preparation of his twelve-volume *Collected Works*, Bierce gave up writing to join with Pancho Villa's revolution as an "observer." He never returned from this last adventure. His disappearance in Mexico has rendered his death as one of the most celebrated among literary people of letters, captivating the imaginations of people throughout the world.

The legend of "Bitter Bierce" grew after his disappearance (his fate was even envisioned in Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes' award-winning novel *The Old Gringo*), leading some to focus more on his adventurous life than on his writings. Many critics do feel that Bierce's work was overlooked and rejected by his contemporaries. One of the reasons for this may lie in Bierce's handling of his own work: he turned down offers of popular magazines to publish his stories because he did not want them to undergo editing; his work was published by small presses in California, not the big East Coast firms, to ensure that Bierce had complete authorial control. While these practices may have preserved his writing in their pristine form, they certainly did nothing to gain Bierce national attention. Despite these obstacles, Bierce did have significant claims to the literary world during his lifetime. Mark Twain numbered among the members of Bierce's California circle of writers, and William Dean Howells referred to him as one of the leading men of letters in America*. In the Midst of Life*, the volume which includes "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," drew favorable commentary on both sides of the Atlantic upon its publication. Some reviewers even ranked Bierce with such masters of the short story as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

In the words of critic Cathy Davidson, Bierce has staked his claim as "the precursor of postmodern fiction." In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," his best-known story, Bierce displays many of the literary techniques that show the modernity that was ahead of its time. He was one of the first American writers to hold up the act of war and show it, not humorously or as picturesque, but for what it was: murder. He shortened the short story and made its elements sharper by using compressed methods of description. Most importantly, perhaps, and what would be most influential for twentieth-century writers, he "invented" many literary techniques: the close examination of time; an attention to mental fictions in order to avoid real life; the blending of fantasy and reality. Stories by the Latin American postmodern writers Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar are clearly

indebted to Bierce, both in narration and style. Though fanciful, there is a grain of truth in the reasoning behind one critic's hypothesis that Bierce did not die in 1914, but that he waited in the Andes until the rest of the world caught up with him and then reemerged in South America to write under the name "Jorge Luis Borges"!

In an essay from 1941, H.E. Bates writes, "Bierce is the connecting link between Poe and the American short story of to-day." Bierce carries on this tradition dramatically and skillfully in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," in which a Southern gentlemen, Peyton Farquhar, is about to be hanged for sabotaging a Union railroad bridge during the Civil War. Like many of Poe's stories, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has been seen as a work of terror replete with moments of black humor. Other critics have found its early exploration of Farquhar's psychology as a forerunner to the theories of Sigmund Freud. The story has even spawned the fiction of "post-mortem consciousness," in which, at the moment of death, the hero futilely struggles to impose his or her will on the universe, creating another temporary reality and escaping death; Ernest Hemingway, William Golding, Borges, and Cortazar have all written in this genre. More simple yet as important is Stephen Crane's analysis of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": "Nothing better exists—the story has everything."

As Bierce may have been a man out of time, so might "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" have been a story out of time. It is modern in its psychological motif of how a man's consciousness attempts to deal with the fact that he is about to die. Its execution is modern; fifty years after the story was written, and decades before writers like Borges and Cortazar rediscovered Bierce'-s techniques, H.E. Bates noted that the story was written in a "language much nearer to the prose of our own day than that of Bierce's day." Bierce strives to set the reader firmly and immediately in the story from the opening paragraph: "The man's hands were behind his back, his wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck." Clearly, there is no need for preliminaries. Bierce also j.hows Farquhar's distortion of time in an effort to fend off death. Farquhar looks down at the "stream racing madly beneath his feet" yet notes only how slowly a piece of driftwood caught in the current seems to move. He becomes aware of a recurring noise that inexplicably slows down so that the "intervals of silence grew progressively longer, the delays became maddening." It is only the ticking of his watch, sounding out "the tolling of a death knell." By the end of the story, Farquhar himself has turned into a timepiece, but one that keeps regular time, as he swings like a pendulum "gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Geek bridge."

Perhaps the most engaging and provocative technique used in the story is the blending of fantasy and reality, the mixing of the external world of death with Farquhar's internal world, which cries out for life. While some people refer to this lack of distinction as leading to a "trick" ending, most critics (and readers) agree that Farquhar's death is apparent to anyone who pays attention to the clues. The first appears while Farquhar still stands on the railroad bridge. His dream of escape—"I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home"—is his last conscious thought. Then, he plunges to his death and his mind proceeds to act out this very fantasy, down to the same details of escape. The similarity here is too striking to

overlook. That his escape is fantasy is also apparent numerous times throughout its enactment. Farquhar's senses are impossibly keen; he hears ripples in the water as "separate sounds," he is able to see the "individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf.. .the very insects upon them." If this has not proven the true bent of the story, Bierce next shows Farquhar as inhabiting an unreal environment, one that is unnaturally eerie and devoid of people. He travels on a road "as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled." He can feel that his neck is in pain, his eyes are congested, and his tongue is swollen, yet "he could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet." At this, the end of his life, he finally recognizes that the world is not that secure place where "no adventure was too perilous" but a changing universe in which the very stars have a "secret and malign significance."

This blending of fantasy and reality is also used to show how each of the story's three sections demonstrates a different one of Farquhar's incorrect beliefs. In the first section, Farquhar denies what is about to happen. The use of military terminology and a factual tone convey the clinical and inescapable nature of the hanging—the sergeant "would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between the ties"—yet the "civilian" still delves into fantasy, dreaming of freeing his hands and escaping. The second part of the story, a flashback, shows Farquhar's inability to distinguish military reality with his vision of the glorious, "larger life of the soldier," He clearly has no experience with military tactics and allows himself to be tricked by a Federal spy into burning the railroad bridge. Though he fatally believes that he has the "heart of soldier," when he does not even have the good sense of a soldier, he still embraces this chance at sabotage as his "opportunity for distinction." What Farquhar ultimately finds in war is obscurity; his yearning for a soldier's adventure has led him simply to be "the man who was engaged in being hanged."

If the second and third sections show Farquhar's predisposition for creating fantasy, this third and last part of the story is a sort of "living and breathing" fantasy: that of Farquhar's "escape." The Farquhar seen here is an improved man. He is certainly more knowledgeable than the Farquhar who let himself be tricked by the Yankees; witness his analysis of what kind of shots the troop will fire on him. The language in this last section is luxurious, with the sand of the riverbank "like diamonds, rabies, emeralds" and the forest through which Farquhar travels full of "whispers in an unknown tongue." The descriptions are imaginative as is the journey that Farquhar makes to his home. And even in the moment of death, fantasy does not give way to reality. The noose tightens around his neck, but Farquhar believes he is about to embrace his wife. As the rope tightens, breaking his neck, "he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence! " Once Farquhar has entered into his fantasy, nothing can vanquish it except death.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stones for Students*, Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Stoicheff analyzes Farquhar's thoughts and actions in terms common to representations of dreams in literature.

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" has received more critical attention than any other single work by Ambrose Bierce. This is probably because it combines into one text the best ingredients distributed among much of Bierce's fiction—satire, irony, manipulation of the reader, the exposure of human self-deception, a surprise ending, and a stylistic compression and tautness. It may also be because something of the story still eludes its commentators, leaving a residual and "uncanny" (to use Bierce's convenient term in the text) sense of revelation hovenng just beyond one's grasp. Peyton Farquhar's death at the end is a surprise, so carried away are we by his desire for escape; yet it seems somehow presaged by the very description that keeps it, until the story's last paragraph, obscure and unanticipated. As Stuart C. Woodruff, one of the story's closest analysts, puts it, "[s]omehow the reader is made to participate in the split between imagination and reason, to feel that the escape is real while he *knows* it is not" (Woodruffs emphasis)___

The premise of the third section of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is that Farquhar imagines his escape in the bnef interval between the removal of the plank that supports him and his actual death by hanging. That time is somewhat indeterminate in the story, as it is for at least two reasons in actuality. Some hanging victims die immediately, while others struggle for several seconds—death in these cases becoming a more gruesome and gradual process. More significantly for Bierce's purposes, though, is that "time" itself, when employed to calibrate human experience, seems to become indeterminate at points of maximum emotional disturbance. Though the time it takes for Farquhar to die by hanging is indeterminate, Bierce goes to some length to imply that at the unknowable threshold of death itself time becomes crucially altered and even paradoxical, resistant to commonplace reciprocities of sensation and duration. (The distortion is mirrored in the narrative itself, whose "time" is suspended at the end of the first section and reversed in the second—bold anachrony and analepsis, which are literally impossible and at the same time perfectly acceptable to the reader.) His account in the third section suggests that, within a short time penod, sensation does not become effaced, but instead divides itself into infinite units of experience, saturating the mind with stimuli. From this perspective, "time" becomes vertiginous, the span of a second dilating to reveal ever increasing interior units of time, which themselves repeat the process of fractal division. Thus it may take "only" a "split second" for Farquhar to transform from a sensate being to an insensate one (for Farquhar is "as one already dead" within that short time, after all), but that moment itself encounters the threshold of time's erasure, in effect turning time inside out to reveal Blake's eternity in an hour.

The third section corroborates this through a complex association of Farquhar's body, and emotional sensation, with the pendulum. The fact that he "swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum" suggests the retarded ("What a sluggish stream!") quality of the time units Farquhar experiences once the execution

begins, assisted by other details of protracted time ("ages later, it seemed to him"), and of intensified sensation ("pains ... beat[ing] with an inconceivably rapid periodicity"). Throughout this simultaneously swift and sluggish journey from sensation to its effacement, Farquhar is "conscious of motion," and that consciousness will divide into the minute sensations of physical escape down the creek, as the few seconds for death to "occur" will divide almost infinitesi-mally into the 24 hours that the escape becomes in his dream. The point that Bierce makes through the "greater infrequency" of Farquhar's watch at the end of section one is not just that time has seemed to slow, as critics argue, but the opposite as well, that sensation has expanded to open time up from the inside as it were, and to prolong it—a transformation necessary for the third section to operate as it does.

Crucial to the principle of the dream that structures this section, however, is the fact that the pendulum is not only a significant metaphor for time and its infinitely divisible (thus "inconceivably rapid" and "unthinkable") periodicity; it is also a most accurate simile for Farquhar's body, which "swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge." Farquhar is "conscious of [the] motion... of a vast pendulum" because his body literally traces it, and he peripherally senses it, in the last stage in this extended drama of hanging, time, and consciousness....

Similar intrusions of other objective stimuli into Farquhar's experience permeate the third section. The "sharp report" of the firing gun, its slightly later "dulled thunder," and the ostensible "explosion" of the cannon that "was cracking and smashing the branches in the forest beyond" are Farquhar's dreamed revision of the sound of his own neck breaking. Bierce effectively underlines the association, describing the literal event of the breaking neck as occurring "with the sound like the shock of a cannon" at the story's conclusion. Farquhar's sensation of "rising toward the surface" of the water is the dreamer's interpretation of the slight bounce the body describes after reaching the extremity of its flexible rope; the sensation of almost drowning in the creek revises the fact of strangulation itself; the "horribly" aching neck and the "uncomfortably warm" bullet impossibly "lodged between his collar and his neck" under the water reinterpret the pain of hanging; the "counter-swirl" that spins him around in the current recasts the twisting at the end of the rope; the "projecting point which concealed him from his enemies" transforms the bridge (or the plank) now above him; the sensation of his own tongue "thrusting forward from between his teeth into the cold air" registers its grotesque protrusion during strangulation; the inability to "feel the roadway beneath his feet" is a similarly accurate impression, obediently revised into an understandable fatigue, thirst and numbness near the end of his narrative of escape.

The sense of strangulation, the sound of the cannon, and the pendular motion are the three objective stimuli that appear most frequently in various dream distortions in the third section. They trigger Farquhar's narrative of escape, and then are extracted and redistributed across it without regard for their actual external sequence (respectively strangulation, breaking neck, pendular motion) in much the same way that an external stimulus of some duration, such as an alarm clock's ring, will simultaneously generate and become situated within the linear narrative of a dream. Various other details of the "escape" that have been explained merely as examples of Bierce's alerting the reader to

its unreality might be accounted for within this dream structure as well. For instance, the ability to hear "the rush of [a fish's] body parting the water" is no doubt impossible, as several readers have concluded, but within Farquhar's suddenly interior world generated by external stimuli it is one conceivable distortion of a final rushing heartbeat sounding amid the "congestion" of the hanged man's head as he dreams of being in the water below....

Source: Peter Stoicheff, "'Something Uncanny': The Dream Structure in Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 30, No. 3, Summer, 1993, pp. 349-58

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Cheatham and Cheatham talk about how the name Peyton Farquhar in Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" symbolizes the character.

Peyton Farquhar—no reader of Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" fails to note the oddity of the name. Any one having taught the story has no doubt had students find the name humorous. Why then did Bierce, who could have given the character any name, choose the one that he did? Is Peyton Farquhar simply one of those old names, familiar to the nineteenth century, which falls strangely on modern ears, or does its oddness serve some function in the story? A close look at the name suggests the latter point and, further, that Bierce chose the name carefully.

Peyton, first, is a variant spelling of Payton, the Scottish form of Patrick (from the Latin, meaning a patrician, a person of noble descent), Farquhar derives from the Gaelic *Fearachar*, meaning manly or brave, the name of an early Scottish king. Such a pair of names, of course, well suits a "well-to-do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family," who is "at heart a soldier."

The name itself, moreover, reinforces the central irony of the story, that Peyton Farquhar is the satiric butt of the story rather than the sympathetic figure he has often been called. Bierce subtly and ironically delineates Farquhar's naively unrealistic view of war, contrasting it with warfare's harsh truths. Bierce reveals Farquhar's past life, for example, through the empty martial abstractions a civilian like Farquhar might use: "gallant army," "inglorious restraint," "larger life of the soldier," "opportunity for distinction," "no adventure too perilous," and so on.

Farquhar's escape also, as he imagines it both before and during the hanging, is the stuff of a civilian's dream of war. Before he begins to drop, noose around his neck, Farquhar outlines his plan:

"If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home."

As he falls, the heroic sketch blossoms into elaborate and precise—yet highly improbable, even impossible—detail. For example:

The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed

Significantly, Peyton Farquhar's martial knowledge derives from books, not experience. A bit later Farquhar dodges not just one shot but a whole volley fired by the Union

soldiers. With the "rapidity of lightning," the civilian, rather Walter Mitty-like, reasons militarily:

The officer will not make the martinet's error a second time It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them all.

But he does dodge them all. Even a Federal cannon cannot impede the hero's flight to home and family:

.. .his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms

This reunion is the epitome of cliched romance.

To establish the irony systematically, Bierce concludes each of the story's three sections with a flat realistic statement to undercut Farquhar's preceding fantasies or romantic illusions. In section 1, for example, Farquhar's sentimental thought that his "wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance" is countered with the narrator's objective statement: "The sergeant stepped aside." The genteely Southern scene of section 2, in which the lady, "with her own white hands," offers water to the "gray-clad soldier," who thanks her "ceremoniously" and bows to her husband, is matched with another objective statement of life's harsh reality: "He was a Federal scout." And in section 3, the narrator's factual intrusion shatters the climactic moment of Farquhar's escape romance: "Peyton Farquhar was dead...." Peyton Farquhar's name itself—not only meaning patrician and manly but also actually sounding somehow aristocratic, genteel—is woven into the texture of the story, heightening the ironic contrast between a civilian's romantic fantasies and the realities of war. The pretensions of his name match those of his dreams, but neither name nor dreams match reality. And the careful selection of so minor a detail as the man's name suggests an artistic thoughtfulness in Bierce's work greater than that allowed by many critics.

Source: George Cheatham and Judy Cheatham, "Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'," in *Exphcator*, Vol 43,No.l, Fall, 1984, pp. 45-7.

Adaptations

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" was adapted for film in 1962. Produced by Janus, directed by Robert Enrico, and distributed by McGraw-Hill, this thirty-minute black and white film stars Roger Jacquet, Anne Cornaly, and Anker Larsen. It won the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film in 1963 and was shown on the television series "The Twilight Zone" that same year.

The story was also adapted as the film *The Spy* in 1932. It was directed by Charles Vidor and starred Nicholas Bela.

Topics for Further Study

Research Realism, Naturalism, and Romanticism in American letters and discuss how "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" relates to these schools of literary thought.

Bierce fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War. Discuss how his own experiences during the war may have influenced his telling of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

Compare and contrast the ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" to William Wallace's death scene in the 1995 movie *Braveheart.*

Compare and Contrast

1860s: After the Civil War, the United States officially abolishes slavery in 1865 with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

1890s: Jim Crow laws, which permit and encourage racial segregation, are enacted in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee in 1891.

Today: While racism still exists in the United States, institutional segregation and racial discrimination are illegal.

1860s: The American Civil War is fought over whether the individual states or the federal government should have paramount political power.

1890s: The Populist Party, a rural protest against the power of the railroads and banks which seeks to radically change the nation's currency system, polls 22 percent of the vote in the 1892 presidential election.

Today: The militia movement in the American 1 West questions the authority and legality of the federal government.

1860s: The Central Pacific Railroad is chartered to build the western section of a transcontinental railroad.

1890s: As of 1890, the United States has 125,000 miles of railroad in operation.

Today: Railroad use in the United States is in decline. Amtrack, the government-run passenger service formed in the early 1970s, loses millions of dollars a year.

What Do I Read Next?

Stephen Crane's 1895 Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* realistically depicts the psychological complexities of fear and courage on the battlefield.

In his essay "The Moon Letters" (1903), Bierce discusses his theories on the responsibilities of readers and writers.

Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 short story "The Pit and the Pendulum" is told in the first person by a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition who relates his experiences with imprisonment and torture.

The Old Gringo, a novel by Carlos Fuentes, is an imaginary account of what happened to Bierce after he disappeared in Mexico in 1913.

In his 1865 poetry collection *Drum-Taps*, which contains such famous poems as "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," American poet Walt Whitman relates his experiences in the Civil War.

P.M.H. Atwater's 1995 book *Beyond the Light* examines the physical and psychological effects of near-death experiences.

Further Study

Ames, Clifford R. "Do I Wake or Sleep? Technique as Content in Ambrose Bierce's's Short Story, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'," *American Literary Realism 1870-1910*, Vol. 19, no. 3, spring, 1987, pp. 52-67.

Examines how Bierce's concealed manipulation of narrative reliability in the story parallels the story's thematic focus on the confusion between subjective perception and objective events.

Barrett, Gerald R and Erskine, Thomas L *From Fiction to Film: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,*" Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1973,216 pp.

This volume includes excerpts of several criticisms of the story as well as a scene-by-scene analysis of the film adaptation.

Crane, Kenny. "*Crossing the Bar Twice: Post Mortem Consciousness in Bierce, Hemingway, and Golding*," in From Fiction to Film; Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," edited by Gerald R Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine, Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1973, pp. 76-80.

Crane defines the genre of post-mortem consciousness fiction and outlines how Farquhar goes through these stages.

Davidson, Cathy *N The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce*, University of Nebraska Press, 1984,166 p.

Davidson examines Bierce's work, focusing on the impressionistic, surrealistic, and philosophical elements in his writing. Analyzing the use of literary techniques in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Davidson traces the effect of the story on certain postmodern writers.

Fadiman, Clifton*. In the Midst of Life*, Citadel Press, 1974, pp 9-17.

Fadiman's introduction to this collection gives a biographical sketch of Bierce, including an overview of critical reception during his career, and analyzes why he seems to be better received in the decades after his disappearance.

Grenander, in E Ambrose Bierce, Twayne, Inc., 1971, 193 p.

Grenander gives detailed biographical information as well as specific analyses of Bierce's writing.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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