

 Prestwick House

Instant Short Story Pack



Each pack contains:

- Objectives
- Full Text of Story
- Student Questions
- Activities and Graphic Organizers
- Teacher Answer Guide

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

BY AMBROSE BIERCE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, 4, 5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, 4, 5



Objectives:

After completing the activities in this packet, the student will be able to:

- cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1),
- determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text [and] analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4), and
- analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text...create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise (RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5).

Time:

2-3 class periods

Materials:

✓ 1 copy of each handout per student:

- **Handout #1** (3 pages) – Purpose-setting and Motivational Activities
- **Handout #2** (10 pages) – Text of Story
- **Handout #3** (1 page) – Student Questions
- **Handout #4** (11 pages) – Activities and Graphic Organizers

✓ Teacher Answer Guide

Procedure:

1. Reproduce all handouts.
2. Distribute **Handouts #1** and **#2**.
 - Allow students to read the short biography of Bierce (approximately 10 minutes).
 - Read and discuss the information about Bierce's work and ideas (approximately 20 minutes).
 - Assign the story to be read for homework OR
 - Allow students to read the story in class and perform the two **As you read...** activities.
3. Distribute **Handout #3**.
4. Give students time to read the questions (approximately 5 minutes).
5. Review with students what each question is asking for and what type of information is required for a thorough answer (e.g., references to prior knowledge, quotations from the story, additional reading or research, etc.).
6. Distribute **Handout #4**.
7. Walk the class through Question 1, demonstrating that in order to address a complex issue, it is often helpful to divide it into smaller subtopics. Students can then use the ideas generated by each subtopic to build a complete and thoughtful answer to the full question.
8. Have students answer the questions.

Ambrose Bierce

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

The short story you are about to read, Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," is the one for which he is most famous, despite having written nearly 100 others. It was first published in *The San Francisco Examiner* on July 13, 1890. The next year, Bierce included it in his collection, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. Since then, there have been at least three film depictions of the story, including a 1964 episode of *The Twilight Zone* and an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

You might find the technique of two parallel events and the surprise ending a little overdone, but what makes this story worth studying is that it is one of the first ever uses of this technique. Bierce isn't using a cliché; it became a cliché when many other authors imitated him.

Critics have tried to assign a number of different themes to this story: The individual will to survive, love of home and family, the consequences of treachery. Whatever lesson or moral you feel this story is trying to teach, it is apparent that Bierce wanted primarily to entertain and intrigue his readers.

Bierce's language should not pose too big a challenge for you, and the technique that forms the basis of this story should be familiar. As you read, consider the overall effect Bierce is trying to create. What emotional or psychological response is he hoping to evoke?

That effect, more than any deep, universal truth, is the point of studying a story like this.

Before you read:

Know something about the life of the author:

Ambrose Bierce was born on June 24, 1842, in a log cabin in Ohio. Although they were poor, his parents were able to instill a love of literature in all of their children. Eventually the family moved to Indiana, where Bierce attended high school. When he was 15 years old, he returned to Ohio and took work as a "printer's devil" (a sort of blend of apprentice and unskilled helper).

Ambrose Bierce

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Lexile Measure: 1010L

I

A MAN STOOD UPON a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as “support,” that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest—a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground—a gentle slope topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loopholed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway up the slope between the bridge and fort were the spectators—a single company of infantry in line, at “parade rest,” the butts of

Ambrose Bierce

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

STUDENT QUESTIONS:

1. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1) What commentary is Bierce making when he describes Farquhar's wife as "only too happy to serve [a gray-clad soldier] with her own white hands"? What facts, both explicit and implicit support your answer?
2. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4) In what way is Bierce's use of the word *liberal*, when he describes "The liberal military code," both ironic *and* literal? What tone does Bierce achieve through this ambiguous use?
3. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1) What is Bierce possibly suggesting when he describes Farquhar's paradoxical view of the water beneath the bridge?

He...let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!

What evidence does the rest of the text provide to support your inference?

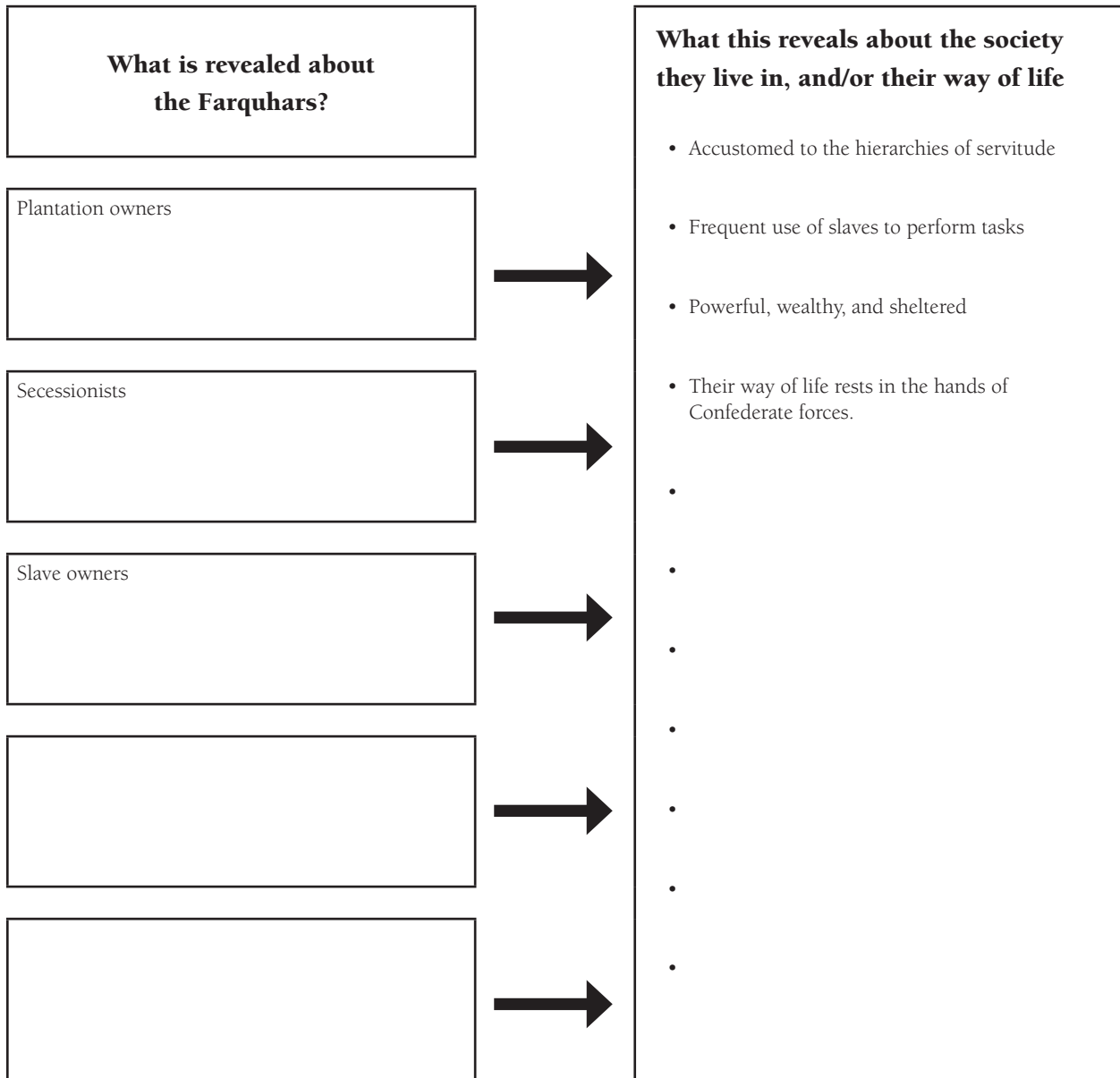
4. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4) During the preparation for his hanging, Farquhar entertains ideas about how he might be able to survive being dropped from the bridge. He also thinks about his family and that they are still safe from Northern invaders. What is Bierce suggesting when he writes that these thoughts "*were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it*"?
5. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5) What narrative effects does Bierce achieve by changing the verb tense in the next-to-last paragraph of the story?
6. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5) What narrative effect does Bierce achieve by intermingling Farquhar's limited point of view with an omniscient point of view throughout the story?

ACTIVITIES AND GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS:

Ambrose Bierce, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*

Question 1: What commentary is Bierce making when he describes Farquhar’s wife as “only too happy to serve [a gray-clad soldier] with her own white hands”? What facts, both explicit and implicit support your answer?

STEP 1: Think about everything you are told about the Farquhars in the story and what these details suggest about their home and society.



Even if you run out of chart space, continue to list details about the Farquhars and what those details suggest about their home and society.