

Essential Short Stories

Teaching Unit

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by Ambrose Bierce

written by Peter Boysen & Stephanie Polukis

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Biography

Ambrose Gwinnet Bierce (1842-1914?), a satirist and American short story writer, was born in a religious community called Horse Cave Creek in Ohio. He had twelve siblings—whose names all began with the letter “A”—but Bierce was not close to his family, particularly those who were members of the hellfire-preaching First Congregational Church of Christ.

When Bierce was four years old, the family moved to Indiana, and when he was fifteen, he left home. He worked for a year as an apprentice at the *Northern Indianan*, an abolitionist newspaper in Warsaw, Indiana. Then, he moved on to Akron, Ohio to live with his uncle, Lucius Verus Bierce. Lucius, who had once been Akron’s mayor, had served proudly in the military and encouraged Bierce to enroll in the Kentucky Military Institute. However, after a year, Bierce left school and drifted from job to job, often working as a day laborer a waiter.

In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, Bierce joined the Ninth Indiana Infantry. He fought at the battles of Shiloh, Chickamunga, and Pickett’s Mill, and worked as a topographer making maps for strategic purposes.

The Civil War gave Bierce much of the material he would use in writing many of his short stories, including “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” His anthology *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* was published in 1891. After the Civil War, Bierce worked as a treasury agent in Alabama and for the U.S. Mint in San Francisco, where he met Mark Twain. In 1868, he became the editor of the San Francisco *News-Letter* and started a column called “The Town Crier,” which became his satirical pulpit.

On Christmas Day, 1871, Bierce married Mary Ellen Day. A year later, they moved to England. Bierce and his wife had three children together. In 1877, he began writing another satirical column called “Prattle,” which would move from publication to publication until William Randolph Hearst asked him to write for the San Francisco *Examiner* in 1886. Bierce and his wife separated in 1888, and his first son, Day, died in 1889, followed by his second son, Leigh, in 1901.

In 1909, Bierce left the *Examiner* and traveled to Mexico to report on or join in its revolution. His last correspondence was written on December 26, 1913; however, no further word was ever heard from him.

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Plot Summary

Part I details the pending execution of a man by a group of soldiers. There is considerable description of the surroundings of the bridge, the soldiers watching and preparing for the task, and of the sensory perceptions of the man about to be executed, right up to the moment where the sergeant moves aside to allow the hanging to begin.

In Part II, the reader learns that the man, Peyton Farquhar, is a Southern planter who, for reasons not explained, could not fight in the Civil War. Farquhar remains at home and operates his plantation. One day, he is approached by a Confederate soldier, a Federal spy in disguise. The soldier suggests that he blow up a bridge to halt the Union's advance. Farquhar tries this espionage, fails the attempt, and is caught by the Union forces.

Part III describes a vivid hallucination Farquhar has between the time that his execution is initiated and when his neck breaks from the force of the rope. He imagines that the rope breaks, he falls into the water, and escapes by swimming to the safety of the southern side of the stream. Farquhar then imagines that he reaches land and walks back home to be reunited with his wife. It is revealed at the end of the section that Farquhar's escape was imagined. The execution was successful, and Farquhar hangs beneath the Owl Creek Bridge.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain how imagery is used to create and influence mood
2. examine Bierce's use of irony, foreshadowing, and flashback
3. identify the role of setting in the story
4. analyze symbols
5. determine the point of view and how it enhances the story
6. cite examples of the following literary terms:
 - simile
 - metaphor
 - personification
 - onomatopoeia
 - allusion
 - hyperbole
7. find the uses of situational and dramatic irony in the story

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Study Guide

VOCABULARY

abrasion – scrape
apprised – informed
arrest – stop
assented – agreed
chafed – seethed; was frustrated
commingled – mixed together
deference – respect; or honor
dignitary – an honored guest
diminuendo – reduced in volume
direst – worst, most awful
effaced – erased
elude – avoid
embrasure – hole, opening
encompassed – included
gesticulated – made gestures
grapeshot – small metal balls fired from a cannon
gyration – revolution
imperious – bossy, fussy; controlling
inconceivably – incredibly
ineffable – indescribable
intonation – tone, pitch
luminous – glowing
malign – evil
oscillating – swinging back and forth, like a pendulum
perilous – dangerous
periodicity – rhythm
poignant – vivid and sharp
presaging – implementing
preternaturally – extraordinarily; unnaturally
qualification – reluctance; hesitation
ramification – nerve
roseate – rose-colored
secessionist – one who favored having the Southern states secede (withdraw from)
the Union
smitten – stricken
tinder – thin wood or leaves used to start fires
traversed – crossed, or went over
undulations – waves
velocity – speed

7. What is the function of the word “gently” in the last sentence?

8. How does “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” resonate with issues from our own time?

9. In Part III, when Farquhar is returning home, the narrator writes, “The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.” To whom do you think these voices belong? Why?
