

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMBROSE BIERCE

Ambrose Bierce was born in Ohio, the tenth of thirteen children whose names all famously began with the letter “A.” He began his career working for an abolitionist printer and enlisted in the Union Army at the start of the U.S. Civil War. Bierce fought in a number of prominent battles—including the Battle of Shiloh and the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, where he suffered a terrible heat injury—and his experiences formed the basis of many of his later stories (including “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”). After the war, he travelled west with the military, stopping in San Francisco where he resigned his commission and became a journalist. He worked in England from 1872 to 1875, then returned to San Francisco where he remained for many years. His biting pieces of journalism were his calling card in those days, but he spent several years engaged in fiction writing as well. He joined Pancho Villa’s army in 1913, there to observe their efforts in the Mexican Revolution. He disappeared in their company in late December of 1913, somewhere in the Chihuahua region of Mexico.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is a comment on the American Civil War, which pit the agrarian Southern states, who wished to secede from the Union, against the industrial Northern states, who wished to preserve it. Slavery lay at the core of their dispute; the Southern economy depended on the ownership of human beings to function and seceded in large part because they feared that abolitionist forces in the north would force them to free their slaves. Bierce, who fought for the Union and was wounded in battle, penned “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” as a way of illuminating both the political divides that caused the war and the stark realities that came with the fighting.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is a notable (if unorthodox) example of the realist movement in American Literature. The movement champions facts and details as they are, without embellishment or flourish. It arose in part as a response to Romanticism, which emphasized grand or noble qualities in its subject. Among the movement’s most noted practitioners were Mark Twain, who applied realistic techniques to works such as [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#); Henry James, who penned *Portrait of a Lady* and *The American*; and Jack London, who told stories of the American wilderness such as [The Call of the Wild](#) and [White Fang](#). More specifically,

Bierce uses realistic techniques to depict the realities of the U.S. Civil War—a subject shared by the likes of Stephen Crane’s [The Red Badge of Courage](#) and William Dean Howells’s “The Battle of Lookout Mountain.”

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”
- **When Written:** 1890
- **Where Written:** San Francisco, CA
- **When Published:** 1890
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Supernatural
- **Setting:** Alabama during an undefined point in the American Civil War
- **Climax:** Peyton Farquhar believes he has escaped execution and returned home, only to be snapped back to the point of his death just as the rope snaps taut
- **Antagonist:** Union soldiers charged with Farquhar’s execution.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient, though the stream-of-consciousness structure focuses largely on Farquhar’s perceptions

EXTRA CREDIT

It Was on The Twilight Zone. French filmmaker Robert Enrico adapted the story into a short film, which won both the Best Short Subject Award at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival and the 1963 Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film. It was so good that the producers of *The Twilight Zone* bought the rights and aired it as an episode of the famous show—the only episode not to be produced by the show’s staff.



PLOT SUMMARY

In northern Alabama sometime during the Civil War, a man stands on Owl Creek Bridge with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck. He is surrounded by Union soldiers, both on the bridge itself and on the nearby bank, who are preparing to execute him. The man himself is about thirty-five, and bears the clothes and bearing of a gentleman rather than a military figure. Nevertheless, his execution is imminent.

The soldiers continue their preparations, leaving the man standing on one end of a board stuck out over the bridge, and a Union sergeant standing on the other end. When the sergeant steps away, the man will fall towards the creek and the rope will break his neck. As his doom draws near, the man begins to

experience a heightened awareness of reality: first spotting a small piece of driftwood moving down the stream, then mistaking **the ticking of his watch** for a loud, drawn-out tolling “like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil.” He closes his eyes and fixes his thoughts on **his family**, then opens them and muses desperately on some means of getting free and getting back to them. As he does so, the sergeant steps off of the plank.

In a flashback, the man’s name is revealed to be Peyton Farquhar, a farmer and slave owner whose plantation lay close to Owl Creek Bridge. One evening, a man in a Confederate uniform rides up and reveals that a union stockade has been built at Owl Creek Bridge, which might be set on fire. It turns out that the soldier is a Union scout dressed in a Confederate uniform. The story implies that Farquhar attempts to sabotage the stockade and is captured, leading to his execution shortly thereafter.

As the sergeant steps away, the rope pulls taut. In that instant, Farquhar seems to lose consciousness, only to come to his senses at the bottom of the creek, with the rope apparently snapped. He fights his way to the surface and frees himself from his bonds. As he does so, his senses slowly recover and soon become preternaturally keen, allowing him to notice little details about his surroundings well beyond normal sights and sounds. He swims away as the Union soldiers shoot after him, making it to shore and disappearing into the woods.

The injuries inflicted in his escape continue to dog him as he makes his way through the forest towards his home. He finds no sign of human habitation in the woods and as the afternoon turns into evening, his surroundings take on a surreal quality. The constellations in the sky are unnatural and strange, and the path he walks seems too straight and wide for human hands to have made. He hears whispers in an unknown language from the woods.

Then, suddenly, he finds himself at the gate of his own home, with his wife coming down the porch to greet him. He rushes up to her smiling face, only to feel a blow on his neck and experience a blinding white light that fades to black.

His body swings from the noose at Owl Creek Bridge. He never escaped at all.

aristocrat about him. Yet Farquhar is about to be hanged, which gives Bierce a chance to indulge in the dry irony which his work became famous for: “The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded,” Bierce writes. Farquhar is a slave owner dedicated to the Confederate cause, and willing to risk his own safety to advance it. Hence, he is duped into trying to sabotage a Union stockade at Owl Creek Bridge and sentenced to death by hanging as a result. This suggests a sincere devotion to his cause, but it also subtly paints him in a surprisingly negative light for a protagonist; though Bierce is careful to keep his descriptions of Farquhar objective and factual, hints crop up here and there that the story’s “hero” is actually deeply morally compromised. He is “like other slave owners a politician,” Bierce proclaims. This links his motivations clearly to the South, and as such to the concept of slavery. The reader may feel for him since he is the underdog and possesses the seemingly pure motivation of getting back to his family, but Bierce reminds the reader that the man “assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war,” and thus suggests that justice may be served by hanging him after all.

Farquhar’s Wife – Farquhar’s wife never actually enters the story. **She and their children** are conjured in Farquhar’s mind in the moments before his hanging, however, and become more symbol than character in the process. Nevertheless, Bierce spares a few sentences describing her for the reader. She’s pictured as beautiful and feminine, “with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity.” Bierce uses terms of purity and matronly comfort—seen through Farquhar’s eyes and driving him on after his supposed escape. Yet she too, is seen as a part of the same Southern society that Farquhar risks execution to save. When the Union spy arrives at their doorstep, she is “only too happy to serve him with her own white hands.” That suggests that she’s not accustomed to waiting on people—an aristocrat—and that most of her servants are black (and presumably slaves). Like her husband, she belongs to the Confederacy, and all her good manners still serve the corrupt institutions the Confederacy is trying to protect.

Union Soldiers – Farquhar has been captured by Union soldiers, defined more as a group than by any individual. Though led by a captain who commands the others and presented with specific terms here and there (a sniper with “grey eyes,” for example, or the “dusty” spy who arrives at Farquhar’s doorstep in a Confederate uniform), they remain anonymous and interchangeable, serving as easy stand-ins for the army advancing relentlessly through Southern territory. Bierce is careful to emphasize their precision, their military discipline, and their adherence to soldierly duties as they prepare to hang Farquhar. He describes them in silent, featureless terms—“The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge”—and they



CHARACTERS

Peyton Farquhar – Farquhar is the protagonist of the story, and indeed most of the pertinent action involves him and him alone. He’s the only character given a formal name (not even his wife gets such a courtesy), and Bierce spends a great deal of time on his physical description. He’s a handsome Alabama plantation owner, a gentleman with “a well-fitting frock coat” and “a mustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers.” He comes from a prosperous background and carries the air of an

move with swift, emotionless efficiency. This stands in opposition to Farquhar's desperate, emotional yearning, which draws a quiet distinction between their side and his. They represent industrial efficiency, they have greater numbers, and they're concerned with doing everything according to protocol. Farquhar is outnumbered and wedded to romantic notions about **his family**. The soldiers' character traits help Farquhar's stand out all the more prominently, not despite their anonymous and interchangeable nature but because of it.



THEMES

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



CONFINEMENT AND ESCAPE

Peyton Farquhar, the protagonist of Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," experiences a kind of "round trip" from

imprisonment to freedom and back to imprisonment. Farquhar is captured and condemned to death for attempting to sabotage a Union stockade, yet just before his execution appears to experience a miraculous escape and rushes to return to **his family**, Union soldiers firing at him in his wake. Just when he appears to have made it back to his wife, however, he's pulled back to the bridge and his own hanging; the escape, it seems, was nothing but a hallucination.

Bierce's story provides a simple oscillation, starting with confinement, leading to escape, and snapping Farquhar back to confinement just as the hangman's noose pulls taut. The push and pull between those two states—a prisoner about to die and an escaped man running desperately for freedom—constitutes the primary dramatic tension in the story. Given that much of the story takes place within Farquhar's head, Bierce seems to be implying that the two conditions—the state of confinement or imprisonment, and that of escape—are largely emotional states of mind. Yet Bierce's story is additionally a testament to an innate, unquenchable human desire for freedom—which is especially ironic given that Farquhar is a slave-holding supporter of the Confederate cause.

Bierce begins by stressing the details of Farquhar's dilemma as a means of emphasizing his feeling of confinement, and presumably allowing the reader to feel the inescapable nature of his fate; escape for the protagonist is futile, and all notions of freedom are hopeless and doomed to fail. The bridge itself is flanked by armed soldiers at attention. Bierce stresses that their goal is not "to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot

planking that traversed it." More soldiers line the banks of the river, ensuring not only that Farquhar cannot escape, but that rescue is all but impossible. He's surrounded by the enemy, who don't seem at all concerned about whether he's going anywhere. More directly, Farquhar's hands are "behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircle[s] his neck." This is the second sentence of the story, establishing his status as a bound prisoner immediately.

Despite this absolute certainty, Farquhar still yearns to break free. He thinks about his wife and children in his final thoughts, and the idea of somehow freeing his hands and making a run for freedom only just enters his mind—"flashed" rather than "evolved" in Bierce's words—when the board is removed and he drops towards the water. So powerful is the need for freedom—so completely does it dominate his mind even in a moment of impossibility—that his mind constructs an actual hallucination allowing him to fulfill it.

Strangely, confinement is reflected as a calm certainty, with the protagonist accepting the consequences of his actions despite his secret yearning. Escape, on the other hand, is portrayed as chaotic, fretful, and confusing. Farquhar accepts his condition—and his execution—as a consequence of his actions. "The arrangement commended itself to his judgement as simple and effective," Bierce writes, which is a very calm and measured assessment, considering that the person doing the assessing is 1. about to be killed and 2. still thinking of ways he might get out of it.

Bierce also spends a great deal of time focusing on the soldiers holding Farquhar captive: their neatness and precision, the swiftness with which they follow their orders, and the detailed procedure of the hanging. Everything moves in an orderly, workmanlike manner—the soldiers simply do their job—which in turn infers a forgone conclusion in which nothing has been left to chance.

Descriptions his escape, on the other hand, entail chaos, unpleasant surprises and danger from unexpected corners. It being immediately, as "with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark." Furthermore, Farquhar's escape is accompanied by a sense of doom: a feeling that no matter what he does, he's not going to survive. The end, when it comes, is foreshadowed by the strange details he experiences during his escape, which create a sense of fleeting freedom that can be yanked away at any time.

It begins when the soldiers shoot at him as he flees the bridge, and the strange detail of a sharpshooter with gray eyes. Farquhar remembers reading somewhere that "that gray eyes were the keenest," and when the soldier misses it's inferred to be a minor miracle. That danger is compounded not only by the way the captain commands his troops to fire, but Farquhar's certainty that sooner or later, the gunshots will strike him. "The officer," he reasoned, 'will not make that 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!” Even after he escapes the soldiers, the woods he travels through feel dark and foreboding. “By nightfall, he was fatigued, footsore, famished.” The passage implies that he could easily get lost in the woods or die of exposure or starvation—and that the longer he remains there, the greater such dangers become.

The thematic implications are supremely ironic, which in turn helps feed the story’s famous twist ending. They seem to suggest, in a very dark way, that hope springs eternal even in the bleakest circumstances, and that human beings never give up—even when death is certain and freedom, if achieved, is terrifying and chaotic. Farquhar wants to be free so badly that he dreams up a scenario where he escapes, and in the process makes his final moments strange, horrific and ultimately frustrating. The fact that he is a slave owner, and as such a supporter of a system of a brutal system of hopeless confinement for untold numbers of black individuals, also lends his final experience of the terror of confinement an air of justice.



LIFE AND DEATH

In one sense, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is an examination of the line between life and death, and at times, how the latter can heighten and

enhance the former. The bulk of the story takes place in the instant of Farquhar’s death: a kind of waking dream in which he envisions a flight back to his home and **family** before death finally claims him. The famous “twist” ending—in which his escape from the bridge is shown to be an illusion—highlights the immediacy of life, and the way it contains myriad little details that people rarely notice until they are about to be taken away.

The prospect of death makes the little details about life stand out in sharp contrast. Farquhar is aware of tiny aspects of his surroundings before the Union soldiers pull the noose tight: things that might not register during the mundane trivialities of life, but which take on increasing emphasis as the protagonist’s death approaches. The first instance of this occurs as Farquhar watches a piece of driftwood floating on the current of the water below him: “How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!” Bierce’s writing style is sparse and direct—the entire story is just a few short pages—and by focusing on such a seemingly trivial component of the stream, he stresses how aware Farquhar is of his surroundings just before the noose ends his life.

Similar details occur a few sentences later. Bierce notes “the water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers,” which Bierce connects to the driftwood not only in the plethora of details that his protagonist notices, but in

their seeming randomness and inconsequential connection to the action. The most telling is **the ticking of his pocket watch**, which resembles “the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil” and reflects an acute awareness of the passage of time brought about by Farquhar’s proximity to death.

Those details are further described as a “distraction” from Farquhar’s wife and children, who are not present, but whom he wishes to focus on in the last moments before his death. It’s a subtle way of reminding the reader that his perceptions—the details described—are among the very last he will enjoy. They serve as a reminder of death intruding onto life and suggest that Farquhar is madly latching onto as much of the living world as possible before his certain demise.

Once the rope snaps taut, signs of Farquhar’s death become more directly intrusive. Bierce isn’t coy about Farquhar’s enhanced senses in the moments following his seeming liberation from the noose. He describes the protagonist’s senses as “preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived.” This is borne out by increasingly intense descriptions of his physical surroundings, including details that no normal person should be able to notice. The most obvious example is the grey eyes of the sharpshooter, noted as he made swims away from the bridge, struggling to breathe and escape his bonds. Such observation borders the supernatural in its accuracy and suggests that his awareness stems from his impending doom.

Even more striking than his perceptions of the world around him, his awareness of his own body comes into the forefront. The first description after apparently escaping the noose concerns “the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation.” The emphasis on physical sensations continues throughout his hallucinated flight, notable in the final paragraphs where injuries to his neck, a swollen tongue, and “congested” eyes become apparent. These are signs of his hanging: death intruding upon his body even as he believes himself to be free.

Death, too, is examined as a part of the human condition in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” Bierce uses his protagonist’s surreal journey through the woods as a way of inferring that other planes of reality exist—that there are worlds beyond that of human beings and that death may be the gateway to them. Though the author doesn’t speculate extensively on that front—death remains as mysterious as ever—his prose does invite serious contemplation as to what might happen after human beings pass on. The two conditions—life and death—are thus not distinct, but rather interweave with each other as the story progresses. This occurs both in mundane details—such as the prospect of the hanging and the soldiers’ lethal weaponry—and in the increasingly strange sensations that Farquhar experiences in the instant that his life ends.



THE CIVIL WAR

The story takes place in the Deep South—Alabama—at some indeterminate point in the middle of the Civil War. Though it largely focuses on Farquhar’s experience of his own death, that death comes about as a direct result of his participation in the Confederate cause. He’s a local, for starters, and a slave owner as well. Bierce doesn’t delve deeply into the moral implications of Farquhar’s position but makes it clear that such a position automatically places him in the heart of the conflict, and that such a position is morally untenable. The resulting drama—Farquhar seemingly escaping his Union captors in an effort to return to his home—can be viewed as an embodiment of the South’s ultimately futile struggle. The world they are attempting to defend—an antebellum world of plantations overseen by white men and worked by black slaves—is ending, and Farquhar’s efforts to rejoin it are ultimately doomed.

Farquhar is unquestionably a supporter of the South. His adversaries are Union soldiers charged with executing him, which frames the entire story around the Civil War and its causes. Farquhar is described as “ardently devoted to the Southern cause,” and someone who actively regrets not being able to fight. His attempted act of sabotage comes about as a part of this regret, as well as the belief that “the opportunity for distinction” would come if he simply waited long enough.

Even were he not so devoted to the Confederacy, Farquhar is a slave owner, which Bierce claims makes him a politician “like other slave owners.” This marks a firm, if subtle, statement about the root causes of the war and the moral folly of Farquhar’s actions: grounding them in the political clash that defined the war itself. Furthermore, Farquhar himself is a civilian, who is captured committing an act of insurrection against occupying Union forces. This reflects not only the way civilians often fought in the war as partisans and guerilla fighters (as Bierce puts it, “The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded”), but that Confederate civilians are morally complicit in their side’s cause.

Owl Creek Bridge itself is located near Farquhar’s home, which itself is “is as yet outside their [Union] lines.” This demonstrates how the war was fought on U.S. soil, which meant it engulfed homes and towns (particularly in the South) which contained noncombatants such as women and children. The Union troops also demonstrate superior firepower and a kind of mechanization of their weapons and behavior. This serves as a subtle reflection of the superior industrial power of the North, which played a key role in the Union’s ultimate victory over the South. The descriptions of his Union antagonists carry militaristic qualities to them—the crisp bark of the officers’ orders, their stances of attention, and the presence of the rifles and cannon—and the soldiers themselves are almost robotic in the way they carry out their duties. That echoes the steady,

relentless means by which the Union armies advanced through the South.

Similarly, the Union scout describes the Northern forces in the area as “repairing the railroads,” which emphasizes their mechanistic and industrial capacities. In contrast, Farquhar’s world entails woods, country roads, and his own estate, representing the largely agrarian economy of the secessionist South. When in the story’s final moments “he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck” and blackness descends, this suggests the ultimate defeat of the Confederacy by the Union. The life he was trying to return to—of a wealthy and loving white family waiting for him on the porch of his plantation—is gone, never to return.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing in the story’s view; Bierce doesn’t directly condemn Farquhar’s actions, though the reader can infer certain beliefs through the author’s tone. Bierce fought in the Union army during the Civil War and was injured in combat, so it’s no stretch to assume that he doesn’t think much of his protagonist’s politics. That lends the story a quiet sense of poetic justice: the belief that Farquhar ultimately deserves both his execution and the suffering he experiences in the moments before it is carried out. More importantly, it allows the story to reflect the realities of the war itself, both the way it was carried out and the stakes that were involved on both sides.



PERCEPTION AND REALITY

In the moments before his death, Farquhar believes he is escaping from his Union captors—that the rope intended to hang him breaks—and that he takes a long and desperate journey home. But his journey is strange and surreal, reflecting both a series of hyper-intense observations about the world around him and details which suggest he might not even be on Earth anymore, but rather in some strange alternate dimension. Of course, that perception proves to be solely within the protagonist’s mind. The last half of the story is an illusion, which eventually gives way to the ironic twist that Farquhar has, in fact, been hanged after all. This seems to suggest that humanity’s experience of reality is a construct of the mind, and that people can’t always trust what they see regardless of how real it feels. Reality differs from Farquhar’s perceptions, and the reader ultimately can’t rely on what Farquhar sees to reflect the truth. Yet despite the fact that he doesn’t actually experience any of his “escape,” this illusion still fills the totality of his experience in the moment before his own death. Though his experience is eventually shown to be an illusion, there’s a subtle implication that such an illusion still holds value and the potential for insight.

There is a firm dividing line at the point where Farquhar’s perceptions no longer match the reality surrounding him. The details change in distinct ways and remain so until the story’s celebrated twist. They begin with a heightened awareness of

his surroundings—to the point of being superhuman. Bierce writes, “He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—he saw the very insects upon them.”

The earlier instance of Farquhar’s **watch** booming loud foreshadows a similar experience now, during his imagined escape, as normal sounds and sensations take on a preternatural intensity. Yet he’s able to parse and absorb all of the sounds he experiences, with no one sound drowning out any others. “The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara,” Bierce writes, for instance. “Yet he heard the dull thunder of the volley” of the Union soldiers shooting at him. The distortion implies that what he perceives no longer matches the facts around him over and above the fact that the soldiers aren’t actually shooting at him.

At the same time, that heightened perception results from a slow process of awakening—starting when “he lost consciousness and was as one already dead” and slowly expanding from that zero point until the whole world is alive with new details and sensations. That eventually gives way to the notion that he might no longer be on Earth at all. He flees the soldiers into the forest, only to be taken aback by its density and lack of habitation: “He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.” This diverges from the familiar landscape he thought he knew, and the use of the word “revelation” suggests a subconscious realization that he’s no longer experiencing the real world.

The surrounding world becomes less and less like reality the further he goes, to the point where the trees “formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective,” and the stars appear “in strange constellations.” At this point, it’s unclear whether Farquhar is still in this plane of reality, or if he has traveled somewhere else: somewhere that only the brink of death can reveal. Wherever it is, it feels foreboding and grim, with “singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.” The passage more closely resembles a horror story than a war story, further cementing the protagonist’s warped perceptions and their ability to shape his experience.

While what he perceives doesn’t match his reality, it does suggest a strange insight—an experience that is his and his alone, separate from his executioners. As he travels on, his journey is marked by no signs of human habitation: “not so much as the barking of a dog.” That further implies that his experiences in this realm are his alone and contain some unique value simply because no one else can ever share them. Despite that, however, he ultimately gains no real benefit from it. The overtures are sinister and foreboding, suggesting that he is in some manner of hell or purgatory for his sins. That feeling breaks when he appears to arrive home: giving him one last burst of anticipation and joy before death finally claims him.

There’s the implication of mercy there, or at least one last glimpse of the reality he has now left: a final glimpse of his wife before his senses go dark forever.

That, in turn, raises intriguing questions about the nature of the universe, suggesting that there is much of it humanity doesn’t see and that distorted or skewed perceptions can mask grim and often frightening truths. What one perceives might not match what is understood to be reality. But who is to say what reality is? In that brief moment between life and death, perhaps Farquhar gains a look at some new level of reality: some perception that people can’t see during life but that he is afforded a glimpse to in the moment of death. He can’t benefit from it—heightening the story’s irony and inferring how terrible wisdom can be when it brings no profit to the wise—but the readers see it, and are left to meditate on the limits of their own perceptions, and how much larger the “reality” they think they understand might be.



SYMBOLS

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



THE TICKING WATCH

As Farquhar awaits his execution, he begins to hear “a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil,” which heightens his anxiety and draws out the moments before his death. It turns out to be the ticking of his own watch. Watches are often potent symbols of time in literature, and this one seems to emphasize how little time Farquhar has left. “Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell,” Bierce writes, a direct link between the ticking watch and the imminent execution. Each moment of time is made clear and precise in light of Farquhar’s awareness that his time is coming to an end.

On another level, the ticking watch signifies a kind of foreshadowing. When Farquhar believes he has escaped the noose, his senses become “preternaturally keen and alert.” He sees tiny details and hears the smallest sounds as if magnified, much as he heard the distinct hammering of his own watch. The ticking watch sets the reader up for this shift in the protagonist’s senses, as both suggest a certain change in perception in the moments before death. The ticking watch, in turn, makes it easier for Bierce to segue into the surreal near-dream of Farquhar’s escape and flight.



FARQUHAR’S FAMILY

Farquhar’s wife and children lie beyond the enemy lines, and as the soldiers prepare for his execution,

he wonders feverishly if he might be able to escape. He thinks, “My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader’s farthest advance.” Then, miraculously, he suddenly finds himself free from the noose, and struggles madly to return to his home and family.

In one sense, the family represents hope: a kind of purity and joy that pulls Farquhar through his dark journey. This appears most prominently at the end of the story, when Farquhar believes he has returned home to find “his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet.” The power of that emotion is enough to pull him through his feverish (and at times nightmarish) escape, and even though it ultimately proves to be just a dream, it suggests a hope worth holding onto until the last instant of life.

This is also a story set during the Civil War, and in that context the family can be seen as a stand-in for antebellum society itself. It’s the world Farquhar thinks he’s protecting, a world where families like his live peaceful and dignified lives. Bierce, who fought for the Union and was involved in abolitionist causes from an early age, understood that that lifestyle was built on the fundamentally unjust notion of slavery. Once stamped out, it couldn’t be revived. In that context, Farquhar’s family represents an outdated way of living, one that Farquhar and those like him can never go back to. Hence, they’re pulled away from him just as he reaches them: denying their comforts to both him and the cause he died for.

and seeming impromptu placement on a bridge hints at swift action: a summary execution without a trial or legal proceeding. There’s already a sense of doom about the story, and the Civil War setting, while not directly stated, is strongly implied by the mention of the southern state of Alabama. In addition, the sparse description—devoid of adjectives and excessively flowery language—helps establish the story’s realist tone. It presents the facts as objectively as possible and doesn’t try to influence the reader’s opinion about this man and his predicament.

☞ A lieutenant stood at the right of the line, the point of his sword upon the ground, his left hand resting upon his right. Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved.

Related Characters: Union Soldiers, Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

The Union soldiers represent military efficiency, and this early description as Farquhar awaits his fate is typical of the way Bierce describes them. Blank, interchangeable, adhering to the letter of every military protocol, their actions aren’t influenced by emotion or passion. They’re simply doing a job, as proclaimed by their army and order by their commanders. Executing Farquhar is the same as stacking wood or getting dressed: it’s just something they do as soldiers. This helps emphasize the differences between Farquhar and his captors, and the sides they represent in the Civil War: the mechanized industrial North against the passionate and insurrectionist South. In addition, it also has a sense of the foreboding around it, enhancing Farquhar’s impending doom and suggesting there is no real escape for him.

☞ Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded.

Related Characters: Union Soldiers, Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:   



QUOTES

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

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge Quotes

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Bierce was renowned for his economy of language—conveying a lot of detail without using a lot of words—and the opening of the story makes a strong example of his skill. Very quickly the reader understands that they’re witnessing an execution. Its location in Alabama

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Bierce continues his description of Farquhar as he waits to be hanged. This is another strong example of conveying a lot of information with very few words. Bierce states that the man to be hanged is a gentleman, or of a higher breed than one might expect for a simple criminal. And yet he's going to be hanged all the same. In one sense, Bierce is using the irony to make a statement about Farquhar's political views: as a defender of the South, he's a criminal worthy of hanging. He's also deflating the notion that one man can be superior to another based on rank: although Farquhar is a "gentleman," death comes for him just as it does everyone else.

●● 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!

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

As the time of his hanging approaches, time seems to slow as Farquhar becomes hyperaware of his surroundings. Bierce makes use of foreshadowing here again by pointing out a small and seemingly trivial detail in the middle of the scene he has just set. It suggests that, as the end nears, Farquhar's senses take in as many details as they can before going silent for good. This hints at Farquhar's preternaturally keen senses after the rope "breaks" and the hypersensitive details he absorbs, which in turn represents a wavering line between life and death. In that sense, his fixation on the driftwood hints that death is intruding upon his life, reminding him to take one last look at the world while he still can.

●● He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thought upon his wife and children.

Related Characters: Farquhar's Wife, Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In the moments before his hanging, Farquhar thinks of his family. This has a bearing both on what Farquhar did to earn his death sentence, and is what propels his final hallucination of escape and freedom. His wife and children, and the life they represent, are what occupy his final thoughts. This foreshadows their later appearance at the end of his strange and disturbing journey, and just as subtly, helps color his justification for attempting sabotage. In the most immediate sense, he's trying to protect them and the purity he believes they represent. But he's also trying to protect the way of life that allowed them to exist: the antebellum ease bought on the backbreaking labor of slaves. Bierce is setting up another bit of irony here, which pays off during the story's famous twist.

●● They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Farquhar hears a sharp sound interrupting his thoughts of his family that he finally identifies as coming from his own watch. This in part reflects his awareness of the seconds of his life relentlessly passing by. The ticking watch is also one of the most powerful symbols of the piece, bringing together all of the story's thematic components into a single unforgettable image. First, its mechanical beats and ruthless efficiency echo the movements of the Union soldiers, who perform their actions with similar precision (which in this case will lead to Farquhar's death by hanging). Second, the intensity with which he senses the ticking of the watch matches his earlier fixation on the extreme detail of the driftwood in the stream. With that "pattern" established, Bierce can then take those notions to strange and even

disturbing ends once Farquhar's hallucinogenic escape occurs.

“My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance.”

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it, the captain nodded to the sergeant.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar (speaker), Union Soldiers

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This is the moment of transition in the story: when the hanging takes place and Farquhar experiences his final thoughts. Bierce appears to be laying the logical groundwork for the hallucination that follows: noting the use of words, which take time to read, to convey the briefest little instant in Farquhar's mind. That provides an explanation for the hours and hours he seemingly experiences in the hallucination, despite occurring in the space of only an instant inside of his head. It also sets up Farquhar's family as his central motivator for escaping and getting home. By fixing his final thoughts on them, they become a source of strength that pulls him along through the story's final section.

Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician, he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Bierce abruptly shifts from the moment of Farquhar's hanging to a more general description of the doomed man's

background. Notably, Bierce adheres strictly to realism in his story, which means his personal political views tend to stay out of the way. Still, this passage is a very subtle indicator of the author's feelings regarding the South and the Civil War in general. He's implicating Farquhar in slavery: stating that the very act of owning slaves makes one “political” and aligned with the Southern cause. That makes Farquhar's execution more than just the brutality of the Union Army occupying conquered territory. It suggests that Farquhar—and by extension the society to which he belongs—is guilty of crimes meriting such harsh punishments, simply by virtue of the fact that he owns slaves.

Mrs. Farquhar was only too happy to serve him with her own white hands.

Related Characters: Union Soldiers, Farquhar's Wife

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Bierce details how a soldier in a Confederate uniform once came to Farquhar's house. This passage is dripping with irony and condemnation, hidden just behind a surface objectivity. Bierce uses “white” to describe Mrs. Farquhar's hands, drawing a sharp contrast between her and the black slaves who presumably do most of the housework for her. It also implies an “honored” position for the supposed Confederate scout, whose position merits being served upon by a “superior” white woman. Bierce's use of irony here is intended to puncture not only that false hierarchy, but to subtly imply that the world Mrs. Farquhar represents is not as shining and pure as her husband would believe. This undermines her later appearance in the story as the paragon of innocence he fights so hard to get back to, and foreshadows the dark justice in having her snatched away from him just as he finally reaches her.

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Bierce returns to the present, in the moments after the order was giving for Farquhar's hanging to commence. Farquhar loses consciousness briefly before awaking in the river below and attempting to outrun shooting Union soldiers. This moment harks back to the ticking watch, and earlier examples of Farquhar's senses becoming sharper than normal. It's also a firm signal that the story is moving into the realm of Farquhar's hallucination, and the reader is seeing the world from his point of view rather than a more objective reality. Bierce remains matter-of-fact about this sudden switch—in keeping with the story's realist tone—but it helps convey the surreal and unearthly landscape that Farquhar finds himself in after he believes he has outrun his Union pursuers. The care with which Bierce sets up those details helps cushion the reader from any sudden lurches in tone, and to experience Farquhar's flight with the same sense of puzzlement and wonder that the character himself does.

☞ He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest, in that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

Related Characters: Union Soldiers, Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Still believing himself to be running from the Union soldiers, Farquhar hones in on the fact that one of the men shooting at him has gray eyes. As Farquhar's senses continue to sharpen, the story's tone becomes increasingly surreal. The link between gray eyes and marksmanship, for instance, seems arbitrary, and lacks any corresponding evidence to support it. It's also immediately contradicted by the fact that the guardsman missed. Not only does it emphasize Farquhar's now almost supernatural vision—able to spot the color of a marksman's eyes as he swims madly away from that marksman—but it links those abilities to the sense

that something isn't quite right with the world—and that maybe Farquhar is in the realm of a hallucination instead of reality.

☞ Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which hid a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

At this point Farquhar believes that he has run madly into a strange wood to escape the Union soldiers. Here, the story most closely resembles that of a horror novel. The surreal surroundings have become actively alien, with an air of menace around them: strange whispers from the woods and constellations with no earthly origin. This represents concrete proof that whatever Farquhar is experiencing, it is distinct from objective reality, and that he is either hallucinating or has moved into a different plane of existence after he has died. In that sense, it can be viewed as a further extension of his heightened senses: now moving into other planes of reality itself. This moment represents the apex of the surreal tone following his flight, and touches on the idea that death may be nothing like any one expects.

☞ As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him.

Related Characters: Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Farquhar's thoughts were fixed on his family the moment the noose went taut, and throughout his escape he's sought a way back home to them. Here, he finally reaches them, and they seem to embody all the relief from the pain he's felt. It might be a vision of heaven: an ideal world full of love and joy surrounded by loved ones. Yet since Bierce has already undermined the "purity" of Farquhar's family, this vision of heaven is itself very problematic: stemming from his impressions and emotions rather than the truth of his slave-owning status. His vision is strong enough to pull him forward through this seeming escape, and in the process to experience some version of life in the instant before his death. But it's not a place he can ever reach, since its joys themselves come from lies and falsehoods.

●● As he is about to clasp her, 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!

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

Related Characters: Union Soldiers, Peyton Farquhar

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

The famous twist at the end of the story reveals that Farquhar's escape was just a hallucination and that he was actually hanged for his attempted act of sabotage after all. It occurs just as he reaches his supposed destination and is about to clasp his beloved wife for the first time since his ordeal began. In addition to the obvious irony of ending up on the wrong end of a rope instead of in the arms of his beloved, it serves as a further commentary on Farquhar's status as a slaveowner. The vision of his family stems from the life he's trying to protect—the antebellum Southern life of white ease built on the shoulders of black slaves. That's pulled away from him at the worst possible moment, suggesting not only that he is being punished for his participation in this kind of society, but that such a society itself is gone and will never be resurrected.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

At a railroad bridge overlooking a small creek in Northern Alabama, a man stands with a noose around his neck and his hands tied behind him. He's guarded by Union soldiers at either end of the bridge. A Union stockade stands on the far side of the stream, with a row of soldiers in front of it, standing at parade rest. The man to be hanged is about thirty-five and is dressed in the expensive clothes of a gentleman.

The Union soldiers finish their preparations, leaving the man to be executed standing over the stream at the end of a plank. A sergeant stands on the other side of the plank as a counterweight. When the sergeant steps aside, the plank will drop the condemned man to the river and snap the noose tight—breaking his neck.

As he contemplates his last moments, the condemned man fixates on a piece of driftwood moving lazily down the stream. He attempts to set his final thoughts on **his family**, only to be distracted by a new detail: a steady, inexplicable booming sound, which turns out to be **the ticking of his watch**.

The man thinks of **his family** again and contemplates some final means by which he might escape his predicament: freeing his hands and diving into the stream to swim away. As he thinks about such an escape, the sergeant steps away.

Bierce uses the first few paragraphs to set the scene and to establish the dramatic tensions inherent in the story. Most of the details in this section concern the story's Civil War setting, but they also sharply contrast the man to be executed (a genteel, well-dressed Southerner acting alone) with the Union soldiers charged with executing him (anonymous men moving in sync, all wearing the same clothes with little to differentiate them). That allows the reader to focus on the divide between the two, as well as quickly ascertaining what the story will be about.



This passage further emphasizes the precision and efficiency of the Union soldiers preparing to hang this man. There's a feeling of enhanced doom about the soldier's preparations, with an emphasis on Farquhar's vulnerability and the fact that there's no way out of his condition.



The ticking watch is the most potent symbol of one of the story's most pervasive notions: as Farquhar approaches death, the last few moments of his life are experienced in a state of heightened awareness. Little details take on enhanced importance, and become even more pronounced as his odyssey continues. The ticking watch enhances the idea that death is coming for Farquhar no matter what he does to avoid it.



This passage represents Farquhar's last moments before he dies, and as such the last moments of "objective" reality before his hallucination takes over. It establishes how what he's thinking of in that moment—his family—becomes a beacon for everything he wants to live for. He even plots some fantastic means of escape in order to get back to them, a fantasy that he lives out in the ensuing hallucination. The passage serves both as foreshadowing for what is to come and an ironic juxtaposition between the perceived purity of his family (and the society they represent) with the slavery that allows them to live such "pure" lives.



The story flashes back to the events that led to the man's execution. His is a slave-owning farmer named Peyton Farquhar, dedicated to the Southern cause in the U.S. Civil War. He has a plantation near Owl Creek Bridge.

This is where the story's Civil War aspects take their most potent form. Farquhar is portrayed as a slave-owning Southern patriot willing to do anything for his cause, and his wife is subtly portrayed as a beneficiary of the slaveholding society that Farquhar wants to preserve. It's a subtle implication of the character and his politics: even though he's technically a non-combatant, he's devoted to the South and directly benefits from slavery. Therefore, he is guilty of the same crimes as his cause, and deserving of the punishment he's about to receive.



One evening, a man in a Confederate uniform rides up to Farquhar's home and asks for a drink of water. While Farquhar's wife gets the water, he and the soldier converse about the war. The soldier reveals that a union stockade has been built at Owl Creek Bridge, and that a large amount of driftwood has built up against it. A cunning saboteur could reach it and burn the stockade down. Farquhar resolves to do so, despite a warning from the soldier that civilians caught in the act of sabotage will be hanged.

At the same time that Bierce condemns Farquhar's politics, he also shows how the Union scout acts duplicitously, suggesting that he tricked Farquhar into attempting sabotage in order to execute him. That's in keeping with the story's realist tone: Bierce neither champions nor condemns the Union's methods, but simply notes that such methods were used.



As Farquhar falls towards the river, he seems to lose consciousness. He appears to slowly regain his senses, starting with the intense pains he feels throughout his body. He believes that the rope has broken and that he is now at the bottom of the stream.

This marks the beginning of Farquhar's dreamlike "escape." It starts with a kind "reset," where he loses consciousness and all goes black. Then, step-by-step, he regains his senses and his feelings, accompanied by frantic activity to escape his bonds. He seems to be living out his last wish—to somehow free himself and get back to his wife—but that escape is accompanied by constant pain. The pain emphasizes the fact that there's something wrong with his escape, and that he hasn't stopped suffering just because he thinks he might be free of his bonds.



Farquhar struggles towards the surface and takes in a huge gulp of air. His senses have become preternaturally alert, allowing him to notice the tiniest details in the natural world around him. He can spot the veins on the leaves of the surrounding trees, for instance, and hears the gnats humming as they move along the stream.

The earlier passages about his ticking watch and the driftwood set the stage for this sequence, when the details of life around them magnify to almost superhuman portions. The descriptions break from Bierce's previous tone of strict realism, but retain their sparse, no-nonsense structure: creating a dream-like tone of surreal details. The reader is more keenly aware that these are Farquhar's perceptions—not the objective truth—and the enhanced details emphasize an increased subjectivity in the narrative.



The Union soldiers begin to shoot at Farquhar and he swims away, after noting that one of the Union sharpshooters has gray eyes—supposedly a sign of marksmanship—and yet had missed him with the first shot. Farquhar dives to avoid their initial volley, then surfaces away down the stream. Farquhar reasons that he doesn't have much time before the soldiers begin firing at will, making it much harder for him to dodge the gunshots. He soon comes to shore around a bend in the stream, safe for the moment from their gunshots.

The gray eyes make a strong example of how Bierce achieves such a surreal tone for this section. Farquhar notices that the marksman's eyes are gray despite being a long distance away, in a great deal of pain, and swimming madly for his life. The idea that such a detail could be perceived in such circumstances is far-fetched and stresses how "supernatural" Farquhar's senses have become. More to the point, Bierce connects the color of the eyes to the shooter's marksmanship—something that has no logical link, but which might make sense in Farquhar's mind because "he remembered having read that gray eyes were the keenest." Bierce's realistic tone doesn't change, but by marrying it more closely to Farquhar's subjective perceptions the tone becomes strange and dreamlike.



Farquhar runs into the forest, away from the Union soldiers. As he does so, he notes how strange and surreal the landscape is. There are no signs of human habitation, not even a woodsman's path. As the day turns to night, his surroundings become even more alien and bizarre: the sky features constellations in strange patterns and dark whispers in an unknown language seem to come from the woods.

This is the first sign that Farquhar isn't experiencing reality, but is either in some kind of afterlife or is experiencing a hallucination. His surroundings are overtly unnatural. More importantly, they hold some sinister significance, and the story starts to feel more like a horror tale instead of a war story. Considering Bierce's status as a Union veteran and his protagonist's status as a slaveholder, it's reasonable to assume that the sinister overtones of this journey suggest a kind rough justice: that Farquhar deserves such creepy surroundings, and that the haven he thinks he is traveling to is an illusion.



The scene shifts, and Farquhar stands at the front gate of his home. As he moves forward, his wife comes out of **the family's** house to greet him. Just as he is about to embrace her, he feels a sharp blow to the back of his head, followed by a blinding light and then darkness.

Thoughts of his wife and children become a strong motivation for Farquhar as his hallucination continues. They represent peace, serenity, and purity: strong enough for him to travel a nightmarish landscape to get back to them. Yet they're snatched away just before he reaches them. That continues the sense of cosmic justice from the passage above—that Farquhar is being tormented for his sins before his life is snuffed out—while also making a keen point about the antebellum society his family represents. That society was destroyed by the Civil War and can never come back. Farquhar's destination is an illusion, and he can never achieve the peace and comfort his family represents.



Farquhar's escape was a figment of his imagination. He's hanged dead at the end of the rope over Owl Creek Bridge.

Bierce keeps the writing no nonsense here by pulling us out of Farquhar's hallucination and retuning to the staccato realism of the first section of the book. That helps give the famous twist an extra bit of irony, while hammering home the notion of inescapable doom so strongly emphasized in the story's first passages. The shorter the passage, the more effectively the emotional punch; Bierce allows the reader to revel in the sudden, surprising twist and meditate on what Farquhar's strange final "journey" might have really been.





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