

Analysis: "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Learning Goals:

Students will demonstrate their understanding of:

- how authors develop suspense through arrangement, foreshadowing, allusion, rising action, and the manipulation of readers' perceptions of the protagonist;
- how readers can discern an author's point of view by examining motifs: diction, imagery and plot elements;
- how authors can manipulate time;
- how authors can use imagery along with plot elements as means of foreshadowing;
- why archaic word connotations should not be overlooked;
- how to identify key words in writing prompts.

Directions: Read the story completely once before annotating it. Use the questions below to help guide you through your second reading.

Immediately after you read the story the first time:

- develop 5 level two, and 3 level three questions.
1. The man on the bridge remains anonymous until the second part of the story, yet he is described in great detail – even his thoughts. Why?
 2. What is the significance of the sergeant being a deputy sheriff in *civil* life?
 3. What point is Bierce making by the sentinels' indifference to the action at the center of the bridge and that they "might have been statues to adorn the bridge"?
 4. What comment on military formalities is Bierce conveying in the following: "Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced he is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those familiar with him."?
 5. "Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded." What does this tell us about Bierce's view of the military?
 6. Explain the imagery of the sluggish stream and the dancing driftwood.
 7. What is the significance of the man's perception of his ticking watch?
 8. In section II Bierce finally introduces Farquhar. Why does he place the detailed description of Farquhar in the middle of the action as Farquhar falls between the ties? How does this contribute to the suspense?
 9. Why is it significant that, "[c]ircumstances of an *imperious* nature, which is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with the gallant army . . . and he chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction." Look up the word "imperious" and note the multiple meanings. Do you think Bierce had a specific reason for this particular word choice? If so, why?

10. Why was Farquhar captured? Why did the Federal scout lie?
11. As the reader, when do you begin to sympathize with Farquhar – before or after his introduction in section II? Why?
12. Discuss the meaning: "...encompassed in a luminous cloud of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance ... "
13. Discuss the meaning of the "disobedient hands."
14. Why does Bierce compare the sounds of the insects to audible music?
15. Discuss the significance: " . . . in a moment the visible world seemed to wheel slowly around, himself the pivotal point, . . ." The movements of the men on the bridge, "were grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic."
16. How does Farquhar's ability to see the gray eye of the marksman on the bridge contribute to the meaning of the story?
17. What is the significance of Farquhar's ability to escape the gunfire?
18. Why does Farquhar perceive the sand as diamonds, rubies, and emeralds?
19. "A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of Aeolian harps" – the enchanting spot. To what is Bierce alluding?
20. "Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective." What does this reveal?
21. What is the meaning of Farquhar's falling asleep while walking?
22. Elaborate on the meaning of the imagery in the description of his home: gates, bright and beautiful, wide white walk – and his wife: looking fresh and cool, a smile of ineffable joy, attitude of matchless grace and dignity.
23. Even though this story was originally published in 1891, it reveals a cinematic style. Review the story and find examples of the following techniques: 1. close-up shots 2. group shots 3. panoramic shots 4. fast motion 5. slowed motion 6. dream sequences 7. sound effects 8. quick cuts 9. moving camera shots.
24. Sum up the methods Bierce uses to build suspense.
25. After analyzing this story, explain Bierce's views of war and the military. How does he feel about it? Support your response with examples from the text.