

Original Paper

Is it Real History or Illusion?—Exploration of Narrative Strategies in Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, exploring the confluence of historical context, narrative ingenuity, and thematic depth in his work. Born during the tumultuous Civil War era, Bierce’s experiences as a Union soldier profoundly influenced his literary focus, notably in his portrayal of war’s brutalities and psychological impact. The paper examines how Bierce’s narrative style, characterized by a blend of stark realism and surreal elements, set him apart in the late 19th-century literary landscape. His most acclaimed work, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, is dissected for its innovative narrative structure, symbolic language, and exploration of existential themes such as the fragility of life, the inevitability of death, and the human psyche’s struggle with freedom and fate. The study highlights Bierce’s unique contribution to the short story genre and his lasting influence on American literature.

Keywords

Ambrose Bierce, Civil War, narrative innovation, psychological realism, existential themes

1. Introduction

This paper embarks on a comprehensive journey through the intricate layers of Bierce’s most acclaimed short story—“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the American Civil War, Bierce’s narrative masterfully intertwines the stark brutality of war with the ethereal realms of fantasy and illusion. This exploration delves deep into the psychological complexities of the protagonist, Peyton Fahrquhar, as he teeters on the precipice of life and death. The

paper aims to dissect the nuanced interplay between the vividly realistic settings and the protagonist's surreal experiences, shedding light on Bierce's innovative narrative techniques and his profound thematic explorations. From the philosophical contemplation of existence to the harrowing impact of war on the human psyche, this study seeks to unravel the layers of meaning in Bierce's story, positioning it as a pivotal work in the realm of American literature. The journey through "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is not just an academic endeavor but a deep dive into the universal themes of reality, illusion, and the human condition, as envisioned through Bierce's discerning lens.

2. Overview of Ambrose Bierce and His Works

2.1 Brief Biography

Ambrose Bierce, a noteworthy figure in American literature, was born in 1842 in Ohio. Raised in a literate family despite financial hardships, he developed an early interest in literature. His experiences as a Union soldier during the Civil War deeply influenced his literary themes and style, leading him to explore the brutal realities of war and its psychological impacts. After the war, Bierce became a prominent journalist and short story writer in San Francisco, where he was known for his cynical view of human nature and his dark humor.

Bierce's writing is distinguished by his acute attention to detail and his innovative narrative structures, which blend realism with fantasy elements. His most famous work, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", exemplifies his mastery of the short story genre. This story is renowned for its exploration of the boundaries between reality and illusion, marked by a twist ending that challenges the reader's perceptions. The psychological depth and the stark portrayal of the human condition in his works not only set him apart from his contemporaries but also left a lasting impact on both the horror and suspense genres.

Bierce's work reflects his fascination with themes of death, fate, and existential struggle, often incorporating elements of the supernatural and the macabre. His distinctive approach to storytelling contributed significantly to the development of the short story as a respected literary form. The enigmatic end to his life, disappearing in Mexico in 1914, only adds to the intrigue surrounding his legacy, which continues to captivate and inspire readers and writers alike.

2.2 Historical Context of the Creative Period

The historical context of Ambrose Bierce's creative period is deeply rooted in the tumultuous era of the American Civil War, a time that profoundly influenced his literary works. Born in 1842, Bierce's formative years were marked by the growing national conflict over slavery and states' rights, which eventually erupted into the Civil War. Serving as a Union Army officer, Bierce experienced firsthand the brutalities and horrors of war, which left an indelible mark on his psyche and later found expression in his writings. This period was characterized by a significant shift in American literature, with a move

away from romanticism towards realism, reflecting the grim realities of war and its aftermath. The social and political upheaval of the time, coupled with the rapid technological and industrial changes, provided a rich backdrop for Bierce's exploration of themes such as death, the futility of war, and the human condition. His most famous work, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", exemplifies this, offering a stark, unflinching look at the impact of war on the human psyche. Bierce's stories, often laced with dark irony and a cynical view of human nature, resonated with readers who were grappling with the disillusionment and societal changes of the post-war era, making him a significant figure in the landscape of American literature during this pivotal historical period.

2.3 Literature Review

In the world of literature, each narrative is a reconstruction and reinterpretation of reality. K. E. B. (2019) analyzed the narrative strategies in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", noting that Bierce's detailed depiction of war scenes strengthens the boundaries between reality and illusion. K.E B. also believes that Bierce's work reveals how history and personal experiences intertwine, influencing people's perceptions and understanding of reality. Peter K. (2019) conducted a detailed analysis of Bierce's short story and its two different film adaptations, focusing on the treatment of the theme and atmosphere of sardonic death. Peter K. argues that these works demonstrate the ability to enhance the story's mood of melancholy and mystery, especially in portraying the protagonist's psychological state and the inevitability of death. He also explored how these three narratives use dark visual and language styles to reflect the deep-seated human fear and struggle with death and fate. Cheatham G. and Cheatham J. (2015) conducted an in-depth analysis of Bierce's famous short story, particularly focusing on its narrative structure and thematic expression. They point out that Bierce's use of complex temporal structures and shifts in perspective enhances the suspense and depth of the themes, especially in exploring the boundaries between reality and illusion. They also discuss how Bierce uses the war backdrop to reflect the complexity of human nature and the impermanence of fate. Tabachnick E S (2013) explored the potential influences of other literary works on Bierce, particularly in the conception of the ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". Tabachnick suggests that Bierce might have drawn from popular literary forms and themes of the time in crafting narrative twists and turns. The article further analyzes how these influences enable Bierce to effectively blend elements of realism and surrealism, thereby enhancing the thematic depth and emotional impact of the story.

These scholars' perspectives provide a solid foundation for further exploration of Bierce's works, revealing the profound intertwining of history and personal experiences as well as the critical role of narrative techniques in shaping readers' perceptions of reality and illusion. The forthcoming research will delve deeper into the narrative strategies in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", exploring how Bierce skillfully constructs a narrative labyrinth that is both real and illusory between history and fiction.

3. Publication and Reception of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” not only captivates with its narrative but also stands as a poignant reflection of the historical context and the adept use of realism that Bierce integrates throughout the story.

3.1 *The Historical Background and Realistic Foundation of the Story*

Ambrose Bierce’s works are steeped in the historical background of the Civil War, a period marked by intense social and political upheaval that profoundly influenced the realistic foundation of his stories. The era’s ideological clashes and significant human costs form a vivid backdrop against which themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and the brutal realities of war are explored. Bierce captures this turbulent social environment with deep empathy, providing insight into the personal struggles and moral dilemmas faced by individuals, thus painting a stark portrait of the period’s grim reality.

Bierce’s authentic depiction of military elements further enhances the realism in his narratives, particularly in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”. Drawing from his own Civil War experiences, he meticulously details military tactics, battlefield environments, and soldiers’ psychological states, avoiding glorification to focus on the harsh truths of conflict. Through the character of Peyton Farquhar, a civilian caught in a fatal act of sabotage, Bierce critiques the romanticized illusions of war, offering a stark contrast to more glorified war narratives. This critical perspective not only enriches the narrative but also resonates deeply with readers, providing a nuanced understanding of the war’s impact on individual fates and societal structures. The intertwining of character fate and reality reflects the harsh and unpredictable nature of life during the Civil War, emphasizing how personal choices and societal forces shape destinies in profound and often tragic ways.

3.2 *Application of Realism Techniques*

Realism techniques in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” are a masterful display that enhances the narrative’s impact through meticulous attention to detail and structural layout. The story opens with vivid descriptions that set a tangible stage, such as the depiction of the protagonist Peyton Farquhar’s physical constraints and the detailed natural surroundings. These initial scenes are not only sharply drawn to anchor the narrative in palpable reality but also serve to heighten the tension and foreshadow the impending doom. Bierce’s use of sensory details further blurs the lines between reality and illusion, plunging the reader into the psychological state of Farquhar as he perceives the swirling water beneath him and feels the noose tighten around his neck.

In addition to detailed description, Bierce’s narrative is characterized by a realistic use of language that enhances the sensory experience, deepening the reader’s immersion into the story. The precise language and rich sensory details set the physical scene and prime the reader for Farquhar’s intense psychological journey. This realism extends to the structural layout of the narrative, where Bierce manipulates time and perspective to transition from Farquhar’s dire circumstances to his imagined

escape. The story's structure culminates in a poignant twist where Farquhar's perceived escape is revealed to be a mere hallucination, emphasizing the themes of illusion versus reality. Through these techniques, Bierce not only tells a compelling story but also invites the reader to feel the profound complexities and emotional depths of the human condition during war.

3.3 The Confluence of Reality and History

Ambrose Bierce skillfully integrates the American Civil War into the narrative, not just as a backdrop but as a critical element that deeply influences the story's emotional and thematic fabric. The setting during the Civil War allows Bierce to draw on his own wartime experiences, providing a rich, historically authentic portrayal of the era's harsh realities. Through the character of Peyton Farquhar, a Southern planter entangled in the conflict, Bierce explores the devastating psychological impacts of war. Farquhar's involvement in the war, described as "no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier" (Bierce, 1890. p. 14), encapsulates the complex interplay of duty, honor, and survival that marked the personal struggles of individuals during this tumultuous period.

Bierce's narrative goes beyond mere historical recounting, blending real and fictional elements to deepen the exploration of universal themes such as the futility and destructiveness of war. Farquhar's character, a composite of real-life figures of the time, embodies the collective experiences and emotional turmoil of Southern sympathizers, allowing Bierce to vividly convey the era's spirit through both stark realities and vivid hallucinations. The precision in setting details and the psychological depth given to Farquhar's character illustrate how personal stories reflect broader societal attitudes and the grim atmosphere of the era. Particularly poignant is the twist ending where Farquhar's imagined escape is revealed as a hallucination, "all this had merely been a dream" (Bierce, 1890. p.15), underscoring the brutal psychological effects of war and the fragility of human life. This blending of historical authenticity with creative storytelling does not merely serve to enrich the narrative but makes it a timeless commentary on the complexities of human experience in times of war, demonstrating how the Civil War shaped not only the fate of individuals but also the cultural and existential contours of American society.

4. Weaving Realism into the Fabric of Fantasy in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Within the narrative, the interplay of fantastical elements skillfully intertwines with the stark realities of war, blurring the lines between the conceivable and the imagined, and imbuing the story with deep symbolic meaning and a distinct literary innovation.

4.1 The Boundary between Fantasy and Reality

The narrative masterfully explores the fluid dynamics between the tangible and the surreal, creating a complex tapestry where time, space, and mortality converge in unexpected ways.

4.1.1 Distortion of Time and Space

Ambrose Bierce intensifies the real versus imagined tension through the inner experiences of Peyton Farquhar, who is moments away from execution. The narrative vividly captures Farquhar's shifting perception as he imagines escaping his fate: "He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him... and then all is dark and silent" (Bierce, 1890, p. 15). This juxtaposition of the serene, detailed descriptions of the surrounding landscape with Farquhar's surreal experience illustrates the stark contrast between the brutal reality of his situation and his psychological escape into an imagined reality. Bierce meticulously crafts these moments, highlighting the psychological strain under which Farquhar operates, which distorts his sense of time and reality. This narrative choice not only deepens the exploration of Farquhar's psyche but also encapsulates the broader themes of the story, showcasing how individuals might cope with imminent death through fantastical denial.

Bierce uses the surreal escape to underscore the themes of illusion versus reality within the harsh context of the Civil War. The detailed account of Farquhar's sensations as he believes he is escaping, "he felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck... he was now in full possession of his physical senses" (Bierce, 1890, p. 16), paradoxically serves to both enrich the realism and enhance the surreal quality of his final experience. This technique brilliantly illustrates how the mind can create a vividly immersive alternate reality as a coping mechanism against grim truths. The stark return to reality, with the abrupt cessation of this imagined escape, highlights the power and limits of human perception and imagination. Bierce's narrative, by oscillating between detailed realism and profound introspection, invites readers to reflect on the blurred lines between reality and illusion, emphasizing the tragic, yet universally relatable, human capacity to seek refuge in fantasies, especially under extreme duress.

4.1.2 The Intertwining of Reality and Dream

Bierce crafts a gripping opening that immediately immerses the reader into the dramatic core of Peyton Farquhar's plight. Bound and awaiting execution on a bridge, Farquhar is vividly introduced: "The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck" (Bierce, 1890, p. 14). This precise, stark imagery not only sets a foreboding tone but also anchors the narrative in a palpable reality. As Farquhar stands on the precipice of death, Bierce masterfully shifts the narrative into the psychological realm. The impending doom triggers a profound psychological reaction in Farquhar, leading to a surreal escape sequence in his mind, where "he felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck... he closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children" (Bierce, 1890, p. 15). This sequence, blurring the lines between reality and hallucination, vividly illustrates the human capacity for escapism in the face of death. The stark return to reality, revealing that his escape was but a desperate fantasy, underscores the fragility of human perception and highlights how, under extreme stress, the mind can fabricate a comforting

alternative to an unbearable reality. This powerful juxtaposition not only deepens the narrative's emotional impact but also offers profound insights into the psyche's coping mechanisms during critical moments.

4.1.3 The Blurred Boundaries of Death and Illusion

Reality is often overshadowed by the figments of our imagination, especially when the mind clings to the last shreds of hope. The story introduces Peyton Farquhar in a scenario filled with acute detail:

"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" (Bierce, 1890, p. 16).

This meticulous depiction sets a realistic stage that starkly contrasts with the surreal experiences that soon consume Farquhar. As the execution nears, Farquhar slips into a hallucinatory state, where "he saw the light of the sun shining upon the landscape of his dreams in dazzling radiance; the forest seemed to stir and shake, which was but the agitations of his trembling heart" (Bierce, 1890, p. 15). This dreamlike sequence, rich in sensory detail and distorted perception, emphasizes the fragile line between his imagined escape and the harsh reality of his impending execution. Bierce crafts these moments to not only deepen the narrative impact but also to reflect on the psychological and existential themes of human existence, illustrating how, even at the brink of death, the human spirit clings to hope, however illusory it may be.

4.2 Symbolic Significance of Fantastical Elements

The story employs fantastical elements not only to enrich its narrative depth but also to serve as powerful symbols that reflect transitions, the cycle of life and death, and the psychological intricacies of its characters.

4.2.1 The Bridge as a Symbol of Transition

The bridge stands as a powerful symbol of transition, marking the boundary between life and death, reality and illusion. The narrative meticulously details the scene on the bridge, where Peyton Farquhar, bound and surrounded by his executioners, teeters on the edge of mortality. This railroad bridge in northern Alabama, a stark structure above the swirling waters, becomes a threshold between the tangible world and the ethereal realm of Farquhar's imagination. As he is about to be hanged, the physical details of the bridge—the loose boards, the stout cross-timber, the position of the soldiers—are described with an almost hyperreal clarity, underscoring the bridge's role as a portal to the unknown.

4.2.2 The Symbolic Meanings of Death and Rebirth

Bierce intricately crafts the symbolic themes of death and rebirth, emphasizing these motifs through the setting and actions of Peyton Farquhar. As Farquhar stands on the bridge, Bierce describes his observations: "He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass" (Bierce, 1890, p. 16). The intense focus on minute, vibrant details at the moment of impending death

enhances the theme of rebirth, juxtaposing the stark finality of death with a poignant sense of beauty and continuity in life. The bridge, as a structural element in the story, not only serves as the literal point of Farquhar's execution but also symbolizes a passage or transition, reinforcing the notion of moving from one state of being to another—life to death, reality to illusion.

Bierce deepens these themes through Farquhar's hallucinatory escape where he experiences an intensified perception of his surroundings: "The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragonflies' wings, the strokes of the water-spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat" (Bierce, 1890, p. 17). This surreal enhancement of sensory experiences as Farquhar imagines fleeing towards freedom vividly represents a psychological rebirth. His senses are momentarily liberated from the imminent reality of death, suggesting a rebirth into a realm of heightened awareness and potential escape. However, this perceived rebirth is abruptly shattered by the return to the grim reality of his actual fate, illustrating the tragic illusion of escape and reinforcing the inevitable finality of death. Through this poignant interplay of death and rebirth, Bierce explores the complex human psyche under extreme duress, capturing the desperation and profound yearning for life even in the face of certain death.

4.2.3 Mapping Fantasy onto Character Psychology

Bierce masterfully captures the psychological turmoil of Peyton Farquhar as he oscillates between harsh reality and vivid fantasy during his final moments. As Farquhar is bound on the bridge, facing imminent death, his mind desperately seeks refuge in a detailed and sensory-rich fantasy: "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" (Bierce, 1890, p. 18). This intense moment underscores his psychological escape from reality, imagining himself successfully fleeing and nearing the embrace of his family. The detailed fantasy, from the sensations of running to the imagined sounds and sights of his escape, mirrors his intense longing for life and freedom, showcasing the mind's capacity to create elaborate illusions as a coping mechanism against the inevitability of death. The brutal disruption of this fantasy by the sudden, stark realization of death highlights the tragic futility of his escape, intensifying the emotional impact of the narrative and providing a deep exploration of the human psyche's struggle with mortality, making his psychological journey both a poignant reflection on human vulnerability and a commentary on the power of human imagination under extreme stress.

4.3 *The Tradition of Fantasy in Literature and the Innovation of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"*

This exploration delves into how the narrative stands at a crossroads of traditional fantasy literature and pioneering literary techniques, marking a significant departure towards new forms of storytelling.

4.3.1 Traditional Fantasy Literature Versus Bierce's Innovation

Bierce crafts a narrative that intricately weaves fantasy elements within the harsh realities of the Civil War, showcasing a distinct departure from traditional fantasy literature. As Peyton Farquhar, bound

and facing execution, stands on the bridge, Bierce delves deep into his psyche, transitioning from a detailed depiction of the immediate surroundings into a profound psychological escape. This moment is marked by Fahrquhar's intense sensory experience as he imagines his escape: "He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck... he closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children" (Bierce, 1890, p. 18). Here, Bierce blends the tangible elements of Fahrquhar's environment—the ropes, the bridge, the river—with a vivid, almost hyperrealistic fantasy of escape that starkly contrasts with his imminent death. This innovative narrative technique highlights Bierce's unique approach by anchoring the fantastical within a believable context, which not only deepens the character's inner turmoil but also underscores the human tendency to seek refuge in illusion when confronted with unbearable realities. Bierce's story diverges from conventional fantasy by embedding these fantastical flights within the protagonist's mind, offering a poignant exploration of the boundary between reality and fantasy and the profound impacts of psychological escape on human perception. This blending of reality with psychological fantasy is a radical innovation in the genre, distinguishing Bierce's work from traditional fantasy narratives that often construct entirely separate fantastical worlds.

4.3.2 Fantastical Techniques in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

The story centers on Peyton Fahrquhar, a man condemned to hang from a railroad bridge. Bierce uses detailed descriptions of Fahrquhar's sensory experiences to blur the line between reality and illusion. As Fahrquhar stands on the brink of death, his perception alters dramatically; the slow movement of a piece of driftwood, the swirling water beneath the bridge, and the distinct sound of his watch ticking resonate with symbolic significance. These elements are not just mere observations but are intricately woven into Fahrquhar's fantasy of escape. Bierce's narrative technique here is innovative, as he delves deep into the protagonist's psyche, portraying his internal struggle and desperate clinging to life. The story's climax reveals the imagined nature of Fahrquhar's escape, a fantasy born from his intense fear and desire to return to his family. This juxtaposition of the grim reality of his execution with the vividness of his imagined escape highlights Bierce's mastery in using fantastical elements to explore themes of perception, reality, and the human psyche's resilience in the face of inevitable death. Bierce's approach contrasts traditional fantasy literature by anchoring the fantastical within a believable and relatable context, making the story a profound exploration of the human condition.

5. The Interplay of Reality and Fantasy: A Dual Exploration of Theme and Technique

In delving into the thematic and technical intricacies of the narrative, the examination reveals a nuanced interplay between the realms of reality and fantasy, each enriching the other to form a complex tapestry of human experience and literary expression.

5.1 Thematic Exploration

The narrative deeply engages with existential themes, probing the philosophical underpinnings of life and death, the human condition during war, and the complex dynamics of freedom and fate.

5.1.1 Philosophical Contemplation of Life and Death

The story transcends a mere narrative about Peyton Fahrquhar's execution, evolving into a deep exploration of existential themes. Fahrquhar's final moments, suspended between life and imminent death, become a canvas for exploring the human psyche's confrontation with mortality. Bierce challenges the reader to consider the blurred boundaries between life's tangible reality and the abstract realm of death, revealing how the human mind grapples with its own demise. This exploration is heightened by Fahrquhar's hallucinatory escape, which symbolizes humanity's innate desire to transcend death and cling to life.

Bierce subtly infuses existential questions regarding the value of life, the inevitability of death, and the subjective nature of time and reality. The story's stark ending, where Fahrquhar faces the truth of his situation, acts as a jolting return to the harsh reality of mortality, leaving the reader to ponder the fragile and fleeting nature of human existence.

5.1.2 Reflection on War and Human Nature

The setting of the Civil War not only serves as a backdrop but also becomes integral to understanding the complexities of human motivations and actions in times of conflict. Bierce portrays war as a catalyst that exposes the multifaceted aspects of human nature, ranging from bravery and sacrifice to deception and delusion. The character of Peyton Fahrquhar, a civilian entangled in a military conflict, exemplifies these complexities. His eagerness to support the Confederate cause, despite being a civilian, reflects a romanticized view of war, contrasting starkly with the grim realities of his execution. Bierce's depiction of war through Fahrquhar's experiences and perceptions challenges the glorified narratives often associated with war, highlighting the moral ambiguities and psychological toll it imposes on individuals. The story subtly critiques the societal and personal illusions that lead individuals to romanticize war, ultimately revealing the harsh consequences of such idealizations.

5.1.3 Exploration of Freedom and Fate

Ambrose Bierce delves into the complex interplay between freedom and fate, a theme deeply rooted in existential philosophy. Peyton Fahrquhar's intense desire to escape his fate and reunite with his family illustrates a profound struggle for freedom against the inevitabilities imposed by external circumstances. This scenario echoes the existential assertion by Jean-Paul Sartre that "man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943, p. 168), suggesting that even in the face of unavoidable fate, individuals experience the burden of freedom to make choices. Bierce portrays Fahrquhar's imagined escape as a temporary liberation, a psychological retreat from the harsh reality of his imminent execution, which underscores the existential theme that human beings, despite their freedoms, are often entrapped by their

circumstances.

Fahrquhar's fate—his execution—reveals the ultimate illusion of this freedom. His journey, marked by an intense psychological struggle, reflects the philosophical musings of Arthur Schopenhauer, who argued that “a man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants” (Schopenhauer, 1839, 106), emphasizing the limitations imposed on human will by fate. Bierce's narrative challenges readers to question the nature of freedom and fate, suggesting that while individuals may strive to control their destinies, they are often constrained by forces beyond their control. This exploration raises critical questions about the limits of human autonomy and the extent to which destiny shapes our lives, providing a poignant reflection on the role of personal agency in the shadow of inevitable outcomes, set against the dramatic backdrop of the Civil War and personal tragedy.

5.2 Technical Exploration

This section delves into the sophisticated narrative techniques employed, examining both the structural innovations and the symbolic depth that enrich the storytelling.

5.2.1 Analysis of Innovative Narrative Structure

The story's structure, which deftly shifts between the protagonist's present experience and his imagined escape, exemplifies a sophisticated use of stream of consciousness combined with a nonlinear narrative. This approach not only enhances the thematic depth of the story but also encapsulates the tumultuous state of the protagonist's mind in his final moments. Bierce's narrative technique is revolutionary in its depiction of time and consciousness, presenting a fleeting moment of execution as an elongated sequence filled with vivid imagery and intense emotion. The abrupt transition from Fahrquhar's fantastical escape to the stark reality of his hanging jolts the reader, effectively conveying the shock of the protagonist's realization. This structural choice challenges traditional storytelling norms and invites readers to engage more deeply with the narrative, questioning the nature of reality and the reliability of perception.

5.2.2 Symbolism and Implications in Language

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” stands as a monumental work in American literature, reflecting a confluence of historical authenticity, thematic depth, and innovative narrative techniques. Bierce's story, set against the grim backdrop of the Civil War, delves deeply into the psychological complexities of its protagonist, Peyton Fahrquhar, offering a profound exploration of themes such as life and death, freedom and fate, and the interplay of reality and fantasy. The story's structure marked by its non-linear narrative and intricate symbolism, challenges traditional storytelling norms, thus inviting readers into a multi-layered experience that fosters multiple interpretations. Bierce's masterful blend of detailed realism and surreal elements not only distinguishes his work from his contemporaries but also contributes significantly to the evolution of the short story as a literary form. The enduring appeal of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” lies in its ability to resonate with universal human experiences,

making it a timeless piece that continues to captivate and intrigue readers. Bierce's legacy, remains firmly entrenched in the annals of literary history, his work a testament to the power of storytelling in exploring the depths of the human psyche and the complexities of the human condition.

6. Conclusion

In the intricate weave of historical context and narrative invention in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", we observe a powerful interplay between reality and illusion, masterfully encapsulated through the protagonist Peyton Farquhar's experiences. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the Civil War, the story extends beyond a mere fictional account, delving into the profound psychological and emotional turmoils wrought by war. By blending stark realism with elements of fantasy, Bierce not only challenges the boundaries of traditional storytelling but also compels the reader to confront the harsh truths of human existence and warfare.

Through Peyton Farquhar's illusory escape from death, Bierce explores the fragility of life and the inevitability of fate, casting a critical eye on the romanticized perceptions of war. This narrative technique not only highlights the psychological impacts of war but also serves as a somber reminder of the human propensity to escape into illusion when faced with unbearable realities. It is here that Bierce's narrative urges us to reflect on the broader implications of war—not just as a historical occurrence but as a catalyst for deeper existential crises that resonate through the ages. The story underscores the need for peace and the importance of recognizing the often-overlooked psychological scars left by war, advocating for a more profound understanding and humanitarian approach to the aftermath of conflict.

Conclusively, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in exploring and understanding the human condition. By forging a narrative that oscillates between the brutal realities of war and the comforting veils of illusion, Bierce articulates a poignant narrative about the human spirit's resilience and vulnerability. In doing so, he not only enriches the literary canon but also invites us to cherish peace and cultivate empathy, emphasizing that behind every historical event are the deeply personal stories of individuals who endure, dream, and remember.

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Note(s)

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