

Dramatic irony in "an occurrence at owl creek bridge" essay sample



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The central irony of Ambrose Bierce’s well-known story “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is the tension between objective reality and dream reality, posited in the context of the story as thematic representations of specific ontological philosophies, which can be rendered in literary terms as realism and romanticism. The story relies on precise manipulation of the reader’s perceptions in order to successfully represent its complete refutation of dream reality. “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” has received more critical attention than any other single work by Ambrose Bierce[...] it combines[...] satire, irony, manipulation of the reader, the exposure of human self-deception, a surprise ending, and a stylistic compression and tautness.” (Stoicheff)

Each of these ingredients contributes to the overall verisimilitude of the story’s realistic *and* dream settings; in fact, the interchangeability of the dream and real landscapes provides one of the story’s most profound observation on the nature of reality. In seemingly “ normal” passages like the following: “ Doubtless, despite his suffering, he had fallen asleep while walking, for now he see another scene[...]He stands at the gates of his own home”(Bierce) the reader finds it impossible to distinguish dream from reality but feels the “ logic” of dreams operating during the scene somehow.

Thus, the story’s most obvious dramatic irony: the temporal juxtaposition of Farquhar’s actual death with his dreamed escape: “ The fact of unavoidable death is so powerfully suppressed here that it is revised not only into an

escape from death but further, into a vivid dream of birth itself.”(Stoicheff)
This lays the thematic grounds for Bierce’s ironic commentary on romanticism and philosophical idealism. By constructing a dram narrative so authentic and visceral to the reader and so difficult to distinguish from objective reality, Bierce enables a profound irony to emerge thematically in his story: the methodology and symbolic progression of dreams, mastered by the writer for use in the telling of his tale, which aims to reveal the illusory nature of dreams themselves.

Bierce, in the dream sequences of the story was careful to craft descriptions which correctly utilized all of the current psychological and dream-analysis available to him at the time and it is this careful construction of the dream world that lends “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” its unique power:

This dream-within-a-dream extends to its logical culmination of birth, generated by the encompassing narrative’s account of Farquhar rising to the surface of the creek[...] This subtext of birth suppressing the literal fact of death is perhaps the clearest example of the story’s persistent distortion and conflation of time, compressing the poles of human temporal experience into a paradoxically simultaneous occurrence. (Stoicheff)

This paradoxical linking of settings and timelines also links the story’s ontological and philosophical themes in just as ironically and disorienting a fashion. It is clear through the action of the story that only one reality can win out, either Farquhar “ fell straight downward through the bridge” and lost his life, or he made a miraculous underwater escape: “ he felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by sunlight” (Bierce). Similarly, only one “

reality” of sensory and intellectual apprehension can win out: for Bierce, it is the reality of objective realism. “ Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.” (Bierce)

Perhaps, Bierce intended a specific indictment against the romanticism of the Civil War era South as contrasted with the realism of its appalling slave-holding practices. Farquhar is identified in the story as “ a well-to-do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician he was naturally an original secessionist.” (Bierce) Whether or not his bitter irony was directed at the South, specifically, the sweeping indictment of his theme in “ Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” includes all who foolishly mistake the mist of dreams for the rock-certainties of reality. From confusion of the two only black irony (another mask of tragedy) emerges.

Works Cited

Stoicheff, Peter. “” Something Uncanny”: The Dream Structure in Ambrose Bierce’s “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.”” Studies in Short Fiction 30. 3 (1993): 349+.

Bierce, Ambrose. “ An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”