

# Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" and Ambrose Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Cr...

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



Godlessness, faithlessness, hopelessness are all common qualities in which we find when talking about the absurd. The absurd, which is commonly characterized as being dark and dreary period, brings about two of the most famous authors in all of literature; Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce. These two authors still today twist the minds of people forcing them to take a different perspective on life and view it in a way in which people are not accustomed. To view the dark side of life in which there is no hope for mankind and where humans learn that their true purpose on this planet has no meaning or significance at all. It is during this absurd era, when two of the most famous short stories in all of literature were written, *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. Both of these stories express the darker side of life and throughout this paper will be compared and contrasted in order to better understand the meaning of what is meant by the absurd.

When comparing and contrasting two stories, we must examine the elements which make up a short story such as the theme, characterization, and setting.

In comparing these two stories, we find a significant theme involving the great complexity of the world and how we as humans are inadequate to understand it. Life at times can be unfair in its ways and can do horrible things to us for reasons which cannot be unexplained. This theme is shown in both novels by the summoning of two men, who appear to be decent in character, to their deaths because of unfair reasons. We as readers are then forced to ask the question: "Why are these good men being put to death"?

The answer to this question, however, lies in a realm which we as humans cannot comprehend and therefore must conclude that this is just the way life is.

A second theme which is common to both stories involves humans wanting total control over their environment. We want to be able to make all decisions in our lives and control our own fate and if somehow we lose this sense of control then we perish. This is expressed in both stories and the outcome involves each of the characters going temporarily insane. In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the man starts to scream and howl when the pendulum descends on him because there is nothing more he is able to do about it. In *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, the man being hung has no control over his fate and therefore starts to dream that he has escaped. Through having control over our environment and making our own choices, we are able to succeed in life.

The characterization in each of these stories is also an important factor in order to understand what the story is about. Both characters are told to be good men with death brought upon them either by being tricked or by expressing their own ideas. As readers we feel sorry for the outcome of these two men because the authors provided details toward their good character and for that reason we don't want to see them harmed. It is through this characterization and the outcome of what happens to these characters which categorize these stories into the absurd. Reader's emotions are stirred when bad things happen to good people and that is just what these two authors create in each of the stories.

Finally, when comparing these two stories we must take a look at the settings. One setting takes place in a dark, cold, prison cell, while the other on an old wooden bridge in the middle of the woods. Though they are not taking place in the same location, both create a dark and scary mood which doesn't offer anything positive to look forward to. By creating this type of atmosphere, the authors bring you into a story where anything can happen, a story of the absurd.

Though both of these two stories have many similarities they also have some differences which gives them their own distinct effect on the reader. The major difference of the two stories is that they have opposite endings. In "The Pit and the Pendulum", the man is rescued at the end where as in "The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", the man is killed. Though one is a happy ending and the other sad, they both have twist of fate on each of the characters which leads to a surprise ending. Throughout "The Pit and the Pendulum" we think the character is going to be killed by one of the traps in the cell but find out that the French army comes in to rescue him. In "The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" we think that the character has successfully escaped the hanging but later find out that it was all a dream and is really killed. Through these surprise endings, the authors create a "jaw-dropping" effect on their readers which really makes their literature extraordinary.

After comparing and contrasting the elements which make up these two stories, we can clearly see the nature in which these stories were intended. The authors used them in order to force our minds into thinking about the

darker side of life where reality sets in and there is no hope or faith to turn to, the part of life known as the absurd.