

Existential inquiry in
'occurrence at owl
creek bridge' by
ambrose bierce
essay



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Ambrose Bierce's short story titled *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is one of the classics of the art form. The story could be read from three different angles. First, the political angle provided by the American Civil War of the 1860s. Second is the cultural angle, whereby the unique flavors of the American South can be appreciated. Third, the story provides rich material for studying the psychology of impending death. This essay will extend the third angle and argue that though the hallucinatory sequence experienced by Peyton Farquhar is temporally brief, within it contain profound truths about the nature of human psychology and existence.

A striking aspect of the story is the non-linear plot structure employed by the author. The story is divided into four compact parts. Chronologically they are arranged in this fashion - 2, 1, 3, 4 - which means the background information about Farquhar's allegiance to the confederate cause is placed next to the event of his hanging by Union soldiers. The last two parts are chronologically in the right places, and it is in the crisp and concise fourth part that we learn that the whole of preceding narrative were the final hallucinatory thoughts of Peyton Farquhar. The material for the thesis is contained in the third part which was only a matter of few minutes but takes up a large chunk of the narrative. This is deliberate on part of the author, for he is trying to show to the reader that there is so much life contained in each passing second. The author is also hinting that we mostly don't enjoy our lives to the fullest, probably because our attention is being diverted from really important things in life like family and children and toward superficial things like status, wealth accumulation, etc. (Powers, 1982, p. 280)

By showing to the readers that so much drama could be contained in a brief period of time, Bierce is suggesting that there is a great scope for happiness and enjoyment during human lifetime which we don't realize in the normal course. The high-adrenaline condition created by the thought of approaching mortality had taken Peyton's imagination to a surreal zone. In this state of mind, the small hopeful signs of his escape from death looks magnified and magnificent. His powers of perception and the intake of sensory stimuli were taken to new heights. For example, " He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf-saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the grey spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass..... He dug his fingers into the sand, which looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of ?olian harps." (Bierce, 1890)

Seen at a glance, the short story seems to take the reader through conventional narrative devices of suspense, thrill and drama, leading to an unexpected twist ending. But the profundity of the story goes far beyond these effects. In fact, Bierce is suggesting two important things about life. First, we usually take many small things for granted like the beauty of nature and the sensory pleasure it can give. Second, the author is hinting that the

proper parameter for measuring life should be quality and intensity of its use rather than mere quantity. What Bierce is also driving home is the relative and flexible nature of time in the context of human sensory and cognitive experience. Rather than measuring time in absolute terms, the experience of living, and more particularly the intensity and rapidity with which events unfold, can stretch time to unimaginable lengths. (Stoicheff, 1993, p. 351) In the case of Peyton Farquhar's tragic death, there seems to be an eternity of time between the moment the noose begins to constrict and the eventual cessation of life. More importantly,

“ time itself, when employed to calibrate human experience, seems to become indeterminate at points of maximum emotional disturbance. Though the time it takes for Farquhar to die by hanging is indeterminate, Bierce goes to some length to imply that at the unknowable threshold of death itself time becomes crucially altered and even paradoxical, resistant to commonplace reciprocities of sensation and duration. Within a short time period, sensation does not become effaced, but instead divides itself into infinite units of experience, saturating the mind with stimuli. From this perspective, ' time' becomes vertiginous, the span of a second dilating to reveal ever increasing interior units of time, which themselves repeat the process of fractal division... in effect turning time inside out to reveal Blake's eternity in an hour.” (Stoicheff, 1993, p. 352)

Without tending to advocate moral relativism, Bierce adroitly handles the delicate job of showing heroic virtues alongside human frailties in the character of Peyton Farquhar. Him being a white souther slave owner, he is culpable of participating and perpetrating the institution of slavery. But this <https://assignbuster.com/existential-inquiry-in-occurrence-at-owl-creek-bridge-by-ambrose-bierce-essay/>

does not discredit his virtues in other areas of life. His allegiance to the confederate cause should be appreciated, since he was willing to risk his life to sabotage Unionists' march further south. His genuine love for his wife and children is also very touching, especially when we consider that the whole hallucinatory sequence was triggered by this love. The whole object of his will to escape death was to rejoin and embrace the warmth of his family members. What this shows is that Peyton Farquhar's complicity with the practice of slavery does not necessarily make him an immoral man. (Gale, 2001, p. 25) His bravery, and attachment to his family make him an ideal head of family in the Southern cultural context.

" By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famishing. The thought of his wife and children urged him on...He must have traveled the entire night. 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. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms. 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!" (Bierce, 1890)

In conclusion, the points mentioned above underscore the stated thesis. They also go on to show that Ambrose Bierce infuses the story with key insights into the psychology of distress and trauma. The story also stands out for its universal appeal. That is the value, meaning and relevance of the story remains intact across cultures, nationalities and milieus. In other <https://assignbuster.com/existential-inquiry-in-occurrence-at-owl-creek-bridge-by-ambrose-bierce-essay/>

words, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* would have retained its popularity and relevance even if it was set in a different continent at a totally different period in history, for the essence of the story, namely that of a honest man's love for his family and how this affects his thoughts during the brief few moments before death, could be understood and appreciated by all of us. Since psychology as a field of study is all about distilling common anxieties, concerns and fears afflicting the human mind, the story is a perfect case study for students of the discipline. That it is a fictitious account of an individual's psychology is impertinent here, for the genre employed by the author is realism not fantasy or science-fiction.

Works Cited:

Primary Source:

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