

Effects of realism in  
"an occurrence at owl  
creek bridge" and  
"the yellow wallpap..."



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There are several examples of the way vision establishes elements of realism in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "The Yellow Wallpaper." There is a literal vision that pertains to the senses of readers, which is created through the use of vivid details made by both authors. This can be seen when Bierce uses vivid descriptions to help portray the story of the man's escape: Bierce writes, "He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!" (363). This passage give the readers a strong sense of realism, as they can easily imagine the agonizing feelings associated with being submerged in water for a long period of time. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the descriptions used by the narrator of the wallpaper allow for readers to envision the setting the narrator is in and experiencing. The narrator describes the wallpaper as "...the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw- not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things" (Gilman 816). These descriptions of the wallpaper persist throughout the story, and they allow the reader to have a realistic image of the environment in which this woman is forced to live in. In addition to these literal images that establish an atmosphere of realism for the readers, both authors incorporate a stronger element of realism with the visions created by the incorporation of supernatural elements. The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" always sees a woman trapped behind the wallpaper and how she is always "trying to climb through" (Gilman 817). This idea of a woman stuck behind the wallpaper adds skepticism to the reader about whether this is real and if the woman is a reliable source as a narrator. Gilman constructs a setting of confinement, <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-realism-in-an-occurrence-at-owl-creek-bridge-and-the-yellow-wallpaper/>

which has a daunting implication of the narrator; however, Gilman allows this confinement to extend into the atmosphere in a way that the reader can realistically sense and associate with the narrator's situation. This happens both literally and supernaturally. The reader is introduced to a house isolated from society and into the protagonist's nursery of confinement. Additionally, Gilman adds supernatural images of confinement in saying: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (Gilman 815). Also, Peyton Farquhar in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek" envisions making it home and reaching out to touch his wife before readers find out that he is really dreaming. From ideas seen through visions in both stories, the literary device of dream comes into play. Another largely contributing factor to the presence of realism in the two stories is the use of dreams throughout their plots. In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the reader is unknowingly immersed into Peyton Farquhar's lucid dream, which is developed by the author's descriptive writing: "He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made a record of things never before perceived" (Bierce 363-364). The dream is constructed so that the reader is drawn into it as if it is, in fact, a reality to the character—and to the reader himself. In the end, however, the reader learns that happenings of the entire plot are only a dream. Thus, there is a sort of fracture of realism: the reader is made to feel as though the happenings of the plot are real, while the happenings are altogether false, even to the protagonist. To discredit the elements of realism in this story, however, would be false. Because of the <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-realism-in-an-occurrence-at-owl-creek-bridge-and-the-yellow-wallpaper/>

vivid and realistic dream, the reader is made to understand exactly what the author has wished to portray. Thus, the realism—as it applies—is an essential element to the story, and one that defines the plot. The purpose of Peyton's dream is not to fixate the reader on his biggest fear, but instead to show the reader how much Peyton actually wants something else—something he wants so much that not having it is like dying. The story says, " He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children" (Bierce 361). His dream of wanting to be with his family is what drives him to envision these thoughts and what emphasizes what the readers think to be real in the story, but in reality is not. In contrast to " An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the dream in " The Yellow Wallpaper" has more clear implications on the realistic elements of the plot. Like Peyton's dream, the woman in " The Yellow Wallpaper" dreams of freedom, yet she dreams of a distinctly different freedom: she wants to free the woman that is trapped behind the wallpaper. Her dream of freeing the woman leads to the climax and resolution of the story. At the end of the story she tears all the wallpaper down and frees the woman. Through her dream, readers discover something that adds to the realism of the story; she has become the woman that was trapped behind the wallpaper. She says, " I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!" (Gilman 819). This adds to the realism of the story because this disregards the skeptical idea of there actually being a woman behind the paper, but instead it emphasizes the freedom of the inner struggles she is facing. From this, readers can also see the idea of women as victims in society, which was a main issue of the time. The idea of dream affects both stories in different

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ways, and adding to the affect of realism in both stories comes one other device. More specific than an occurrence of dreams throughout the stories, is the pervasive element of alerted perception, which is used by both authors to affect the realism of each story. Most clearly, the reader is made to believe that Peyton is struggling to escape death, but he is truthfully about to die. The entire plot of the story is essentially just a flash in Peyton's imagination, which takes place in the moments before his death. The reader learns the truth in the final words of the story: "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 366). This clarification at the end of the story, allows readers to understand that Peyton's escape is not real, and thus seems to diminish the realism of the story. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the reader is subjected to an altered perception just as disorienting as that in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek." Instead of learning that the happenings of the story are false, however, the reader learns that the narrator is, in fact, the trapped woman. Thus, all the information the reader learns throughout the story becomes subject to his or her skepticism. The reader is initially skeptical of there even being a woman trapped, yet this woman serves as a catalyst to the plot, and the reader chooses to accept her narration. In the end, however, readers' perceptions are changed through the discovery of the trapped woman actually being the narrator. Altered perception has a strong effect on both the characters and the readers, and in consequence the realism in both stories is affected dramatically. It may seem that these altered perceptions serve to detract from the realism in the stories; but in fact, when viewed from the appropriate perspective, the intentional use of altered perception by the authors creates realism to the elements that are <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-realism-in-an-occurrence-at-owl-creek-bridge-and-the-yellow-wallpaper/>

most closely associated with the purpose of the works and the themes in which these works portray. Realisms' essentiality cannot go unnoticed after examining the plots of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "The Yellow Wallpaper." In both stories, the authors use realism to portray a vivid atmosphere and situations, which the reader is able to associate with on a close emotional level. Though some elements seem to be entirely disorienting to the reader, their existence only strengthens the messages that the authors seek to convey in their complex plots. Bierce intentionally manipulates his readers. He eliminates time as a medium through which readers can navigate his narrative by having the entire plot take place in a matter of seconds. Bierce creates a plot so captivating that an average reader is unable to notice anything out of the ordinary, and the reader becomes fascinated by the protagonist's escape. Yet, in fact, it seems that Bierce is trying to show a weakness on the part of both the reader and the protagonist: the reader is made to believe a story that is entirely false, while Bierce seeks to show that dreams and hallucination in bad situations are only a weakness of a person unable to cope with life's struggles. Gilman's message in "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be much more broadly applied. The story based on a woman confined can be applied much more broadly to the situations of the time period. When the story was written, women were not treated equally, and the story conveys the negative effect it had on women. Moreover, "The Yellow Wallpaper," shows that those with mental illness may not be appropriately considered as having a disorder—and, this issue is specifically applied to women. Both stories, therefore, have elements which create or diminish realism on the surface—but the elements and situations the authors create are purposeful and complex, and, in the end, serve to

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create plots with meaningful themes in which the authors' purpose is clearly shown.