

How do Bierce's word choices  
develop themes in  
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”?

In this lesson you will learn  
how two themes interact and  
build on one another by  
analyzing an author's  
word choices.

# Let's Review

## AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE

by

Ambrose Bierce

THE MILLENNIUM FULCRUM EDITION, 1988

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. 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. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

- Short story by Ambrose Bierce

- Main Character—Peyton Farquhar

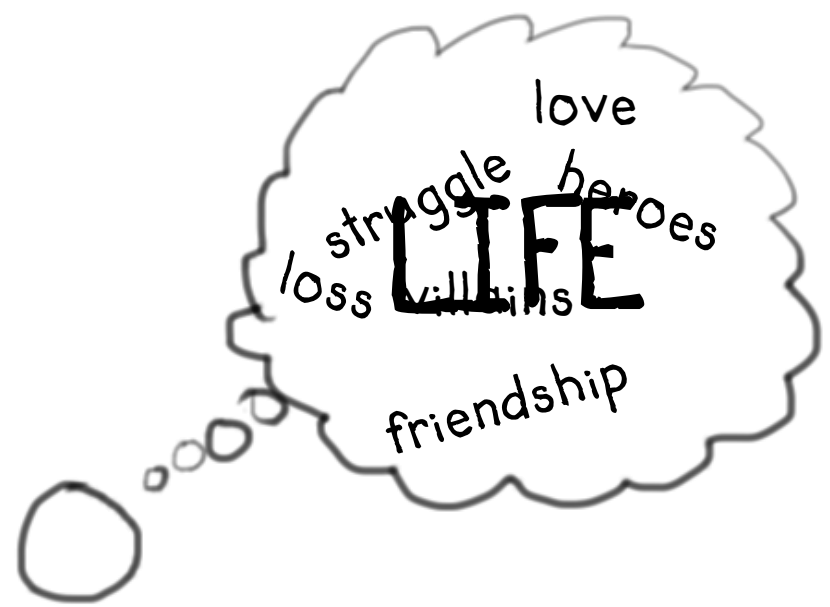
- Tricks us into thinking escape is real



## Let's Review

Theme:  
big idea about life  
or humanity

One theme in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is that the division between reality and illusion is not always distinct.



## Core Lesson

- 1 Reread highlighted text and determine an additional theme based on patterns you notice.
- 2 Ask yourself: “How does this new theme interact with and build on another theme from the text?”
- 3 Ask yourself: “Why did the author include both of these themes in his text?”

# Core Lesson

1

Reread highlighted text and determine an additional theme based on patterns you notice.

Farquhar wants to believe that his wife and children are important to him right now.

What actually DOES become important is the ticking of his watch, the passing of time as he waits to be hanged.

## Core Lesson

1

Reread highlighted text and determine an additional theme based on patterns you notice.

- Longing
- Release of his energies
- Opportunity distinct
- Civilian who at heart a soldier
- All is fair in love and war
- Villainous dictum

Our self-perceptions are often incorrect and unreliable.

## Core Lesson

2 Ask yourself: “How does this new theme interact with and build on another theme from the text?”

What sound does Farquhar hear?

Was that really his watch?

Is this war a fair and noble cause?

What is important to Farquhar?

Is Farquhar tricked only by the soldier?

Is Farquhar a victim of his own illusion?

The division  
between reality  
and illusion is not  
always distinct.

Our self-  
perceptions are  
often incorrect  
and unreliable.



## Core Lesson

3 Ask yourself: “Why did the author include both of these themes in his text?”

The division  
between reality  
and illusion  
always divides

The division  
between reality  
and illusion  
always divides

Farquhar's  
misperceptions  
and belief in  
illusion can be  
compared to  
misperceptions  
and belief in  
illusion of what  
war could  
achieve,  
particularly the  
Civil War.

Self-  
perceptions are  
correct  
reliable. Self-  
perceptions are  
incorrect  
unreliable.

## Core Lesson

### How do Bierce's word choices develop themes in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge?"

Bierce carefully chooses the words he uses when describing what Farquhar pays attention to as he prepares to be hanged. Bierce uses words like "impatience", "maddening", "apprehension", and a desire to "shriek" to help us to see that Farquhar is a complicated character, a man who wants to be unselfish and focus on his family, but who ends up obsessing over the time he has left. These words help us realize that Farquhar deceives himself about who he is and is also unable to tell the difference between the reality and illusion of his ticking watch.

When Bierce describes Farquhar in the first paragraph of section II, he uses words like "longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of a soldier, the opportunity for distinction". These words shape our understanding of Farquhar as a man who wants to be more than he is and to prove himself worthy as a soldier. Bierce also writes that Farquhar believes in the saying "all is fair in love and war," but still wants to try to escape the punishment that he fairly deserves. Thus, we end up questioning if Farquhar had an accurate idea of the reality of war and if he had an accurate perception of himself.

Bierce uses his words to develop two themes in the story. One theme that he develops is the idea that the division between reality and illusion is not always distinct. A second theme is the idea that our perceptions are often incorrect and unreliable. Also, these two themes work together to expose another potential theme: the theme of the realities of war. Here, Farquhar's misperceptions and belief in illusion can be compared to misperceptions and belief in the illusion of what war could achieve, particularly the Civil War.

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