2006 Second Place Critical Analysis

On “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

Since its publication in 1891, Ambrose Bierce’s short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” has satisfied audiences with its ability to shock and delight in a short amount of time. Although taking place in the context of the Civil War and written by an American author, it can still be appreciated by readers from diverse times and places for its unique literary value. The only event in the story is that Peyton Farquhar, a Confederate supporter in the Civil War, is hanged by the opposing forces. But during this single event, Bierce carefully misleads the audience into thinking that an action-packed escape scene is actually taking place, when, in fact, Farquhar is only imagining it, and thus achieves a completely unexpected conclusion: “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 49). In short, Bierce employs masterful use of biased narration, characterization, and minute detail to delude the reader and create the illusion of trust, providing a textbook example of the subtle deception of the surprise ending.

In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” the third-person narrator relates the story with special emphasis on the thoughts and perceptions of the main character, Peyton Farquhar. Prior to his execution, the narrator focuses in on a number of acute perceptions particular to Farquhar, establishing a precedent for the remainder of the story. He exaggerates minor mental details, that “a piece of driftwood caught his attention” (41), and that “the ticking of his watch” “hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife” (42). The narrator even includes mental exclamations of Farquhar without using quotes, such as, “What a sluggish stream!” (42). These signposts signal that Peyton’s perceptions are directly influencing what information is being revealed by the narrator to the reader. Bierce does this so that, when Peyton drifts off into his elaborate fantasy of escape, there will not be a change of continuity in the story—the audience will not be able to detect that Peyton is merely fantasizing. Thus, Bierce limits the information revealed to the reader, first filtering it through the main
character, facilitating his ability to produce the shock ending when the audience finds out that they have incorrectly been led to believe that Farquhar’s thoughts and perceptions were consistent with reality.

The fact that Bierce does not explore the mental attitudes or perspectives of any of the minor characters in the Federal army goes hand in hand with the above concept. The reader only learns of physical characteristics and actions associated with minor characters, that “the sentinels…might have been statues to adorn the bridge,” that “the sergeant turned to the captain,” and that “the captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, making no sign” (41). In contrasting these outward descriptions with the specific thought patterns and heightened perceptions of Peyton Farquhar, the importance of perspective becomes quite clear. Imagine how the story would sound if the narrator relied on the vantage points of one of the minor characters—the reader would merely see a man being hanged, and all sense of surprise would vanish. Thus, perspective proves essential in ultimately achieving the shock ending at the close.

Also key to Bierce’s success in this short story is his method of characterizing Peyton Farquhar. The narrator presents him as the protagonist with the intention of provoking the sympathy of the audience. For example, in Section II of the narrative, Peyton is characterized as a “well-to-do planter” of “an old and highly respected Alabama family” who fervently supports the Southern cause (42). Although some readers, especially in modern times, would disapprove of this quality, they are prompted by the narrator to admire his courage, passion, and patriotism in that “no service was too humble for him to perform,” and “no adventure too perilous for him to undertake” for the cause of his country (43). And if the reader still views Farquhar as an enemy, they no doubt pity him for the reason that he is sent to the gallows: a Federal scout, disguised as a Confederate soldier, rides up to his home and urges him to cause some mischief on a nearby Union camp. Farquhar is accordingly caught and sentenced to death for his actions. This mendacious Union soldier is portrayed as the enemy who tricks an otherwise innocent man, and Peyton is considered the victim of his deceit. This promotes a favorable view of the “doomed” man (42) and an increased hope in his survival, making the surprise ending much more unexpected and emotional for the audience.

But perhaps the clearest evidence of the narrator’s sympathy for Farquhar is revealed through his carefully crafted description in Section I of the short story. The narrator characterizes the man to be executed:
this gentleman was “[e]vidently… no vulgar assassin,” as he wore “a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp” (41). The narrator also depicts him as a “civilian” (41) who, prior to being hanged, “closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children” (42). This sympathetic characterization is of paramount importance because when the sudden shift to action occurs in Section III—Farquhar supposedly breaks free from the rope and rides the fast flowing river to safety amidst showers of bullets from the army (in reality, he only imagines doing so)—the audience will be more inclined to cheer him on, as he is the protagonist. The reader feels guilty in supporting a deceptive Union army, whose “movements were grotesque and horrible” (46), and condemning a “civilian” (41) whose thoughts “of his wife and children urged him on” in the face of despair and death (48). Because the audience views Farquhar as the protagonist, the conclusion of the story proves more shocking and stirring because the audience has an emotional interest in Farquhar’s survival, and is more inclined to believe that the “good guy” will survive.

Finally, and arguably most important, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” succeeds in deceiving the audience owing to the minute details and logical flow of the action. Section III, the scene in which Farquhar makes his “elaborate escape” from the Union army, is wrought with specific, almost superfluous details that serve to make the action-packed sequence appear wholly realistic to the audience. It is important to emphasize that almost everything described in Section III is relayed as reality to the audience, even though it is only occurring in Peyton’s imagination. Bierce deliberately does this so that the event that has been expected, but delayed since the beginning of the story—Peyton’s execution—suddenly seems like the most unexpected and shocking event possible. This is the genius of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” that Bierce makes the inevitable seem impossible.

In the beginning of Section III, Peyton, “the intellectual part of his nature” completely shut down in light of his dire circumstances (44), imagines that the rope from which he hangs suddenly snaps, and that he falls into a rapidly moving river. He thinks up the idea that “the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs” (44). In reality, there is no water, but because Peyton imagines it, and because the narrator relies on Peyton’s distorted perspective as a filter for revealing information, the reader is led to believe that this conjured detail is true. This theme pervades the remainder of the text with remarkable logic,
considering his disturbed mental and emotional state. He falsely imagines that he manages to remove the noose, and even commends himself for doing so, saying, “Ah, that was a fine endeavor! Bravo!” (45). He imagines that a barrage of bullets is fired at him, “striking the water smartly within a few inches of his head,” and “spattering his face with spray” (46). When he finally reaches safety, he is “restored” and “[weeps] with delight” (47). He even imagines walking “[a]ll that day” through the wilderness, finding his way home by “laying his course by the rounding sun” by day and noting the “great golden stars [which looked] unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations” by night (48). The reader would be hard pressed to discover what is really going on—that Peyton is merely swinging gently back and forth from a rope, imagining everything as he suffocates—owing to the surprisingly logical flow of thoughts and perceptions and the great detail included.

But the above examples of detail included in Section III provide an insufficient sampling of the depth of Peyton’s imagination. Further examples will illustrate the fact that while on the verge of death, Farquhar experiences a dramatic increase in his sensory perceptions, which are “preternaturally keen and alert” (45). As he floats down the river, he sees “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” (45). Furthermore, Peyton notices “the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass” (45). And when the Union soldiers open fire, Peyton sees “the eye of [a soldier] on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a grey eye” (46). These acute details are so specific—even superfluous, perhaps detracting from the reality and believability of the scene—that any suspicion that Peyton is imagining this series of events seems to vanish away under the pretense that no person could have such a detailed perception of things imagined in such a panic-ridden state. In this sense, Bierce’s ability to achieve the shock ending is inseparably linked with the minute details included throughout the short story.

In conclusion, Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” exemplifies essential qualities of deceptive writing worthy of explanation and emulation. Because Peyton Farquhar is portrayed as the protagonist, exhibiting honorable qualities such as courage and love of family despite his ill-fated circumstances, he gains sympathy from the audience, and thus, their emotional involvement and support
throughout the story. Also, because the details of the action are primarily limited to the thoughts and perceptions of Farquhar, Bierce manages to convince the audience that Peyton’s imagination coincides with reality, which illusion is enhanced by the minor details included in the description of the escape scene. Owing to this brilliant methodology, Bierce’s memorable and climactic final sentence rings with shocking finality in the reader’s mind: “Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge” (49).