

ANALYSIS

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1891)



Ambrose Bierce

(1842-1914?)

“[Stephen] Crane made no comment whatever, sliding his glass of whiskey up and down. Later he asked whether [journalist Robert H.] Davis had read Bierce’s ‘Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.’ ‘Nothing better exists. That story contains everything. Move your foot over,’ and he wanted to know what Bierce was like personally--especially whether he had plenty of enemies. ‘More than he needs,’ Davis said. ‘Good,’ said Crane. ‘Then he will become an immortal,’ and shook hands, just shaking his head when Davis gestured toward his untouched whiskey.” [1897]

John Berryman
Stephen Crane
(World/Meridian 1962) 170

His best and most reprinted story is “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” A captured Confederate is hung from a bridge by Union troops, but the rope breaks--and he falls into the creek! He escapes ashore and finally makes it back to his plantation: “He must have traveled the entire night.” He rushes toward the open arms of his wife coming down from the veranda to embrace him. “As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck... His body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge.”

The surprise ending and the gothic horror are in the tradition of Poe. As a whole, however, the story is a brilliant early example of Modernism, combining techniques of Realism, Impressionism and Expressionism with Naturalistic themes: “Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color--that was all he saw”; “They were in silhouette against the blue sky...their forms gigantic”; “The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson on perspective”; “A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of aeolian harps”; “his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth.” Bierce here joins Crane, Chopin and Wharton as the most vivid Impressionists in American fiction before F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story is exceptional for its psychological insights, its manipulation of time and its hallucinatory Expressionism.

Michael Hollister (2015)

“There are several remarkable stories in this book. The best, an almost perfect one, and the ultimate justification of the life and career of Ambrose Bierce, is the most famous—‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.’ Here the surprise ending is an entirely appropriate device, not a gimmick; the terrible shock of the story must be concealed from the reader as it is concealed from the hanged man Peyton Farquhar. Nor does it matter that we are told very little about Farquhar, and even less about the soldiers who have captured him. We do not need such information: the protagonists have a genuine universality. The prose is beautifully controlled: terse and professional when the scene at the bridge is described, rich and fanciful when Farquhar journeys back through his fantasy-forest, unbearably romantic when he reaches home, icily detached once more in the final sentences. Here Bierce’s pessimism achieves the authority of high art; his irony is nearly absolute; his despair enfolds us all.”

Marcus Cunliffe, Afterward
In the Midst of Life and Other Tales (1891)
(New American Library/Signet 1961) 254

“A photograph of Bierce in uniform shows a fierce-eyed and frowning young lieutenant, with a thick crest of hair and a shaggy mustache. He took part, under General Hazen, in the second day of the battle of Shiloh, advancing, in the teeth of terrific artillery, between Owl Creek and the Tennessee River. The regiment distinguished itself, and the battle, with its blunders and its terrible carnage, made a lasting impression on him. He later wrote a gruesome description of a company of Illinois soldiers, who, refusing to surrender, were completely mowed down and afterwards incinerated in a burning wood. A number of Bierce’s short stories were based on real incidents remembered from this battle, and he transposed the Owl Creek from Tennessee to Alabama and made use of a hanging that took place at this time for one of the best of these stories—‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge’--which was to be an epitome of Bierce’s strange doomed and constricted life.”

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1966) 618

Michael Hollister (2015)