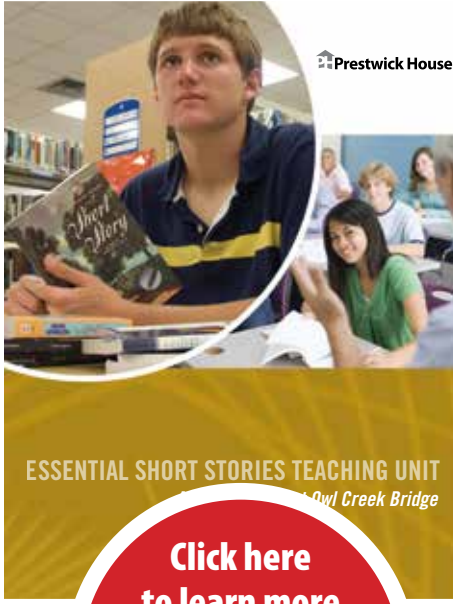




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**An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge**

by Ambrose Bierce

written by Peter Boysen & Stephanie Polukis

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# An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

## Biography

Ambrose Gwinnet Bierce (1842-1914?), a satirist and American short story writer, was born in a religious community called Horse Cave Creek in Ohio. He had twelve siblings—whose names all began with the letter “A”—but Bierce was not close to his family, particularly those who were members of the hellfire-preaching First Congregational Church of Christ.

When Bierce was four years old, the family moved to Indiana, and when he was fifteen, he left home. He worked for a year as an apprentice at the *Northern Indianan*, an abolitionist newspaper in Warsaw, Indiana. Then, he moved on to Akron, Ohio to live with his uncle, Lucius Verus Bierce. Lucius, who had once been Akron’s mayor, had served proudly in the military and encouraged Bierce to enroll in the Kentucky Military Institute. However, after a year, Bierce left school and drifted from job to job, often working as a day laborer a waiter.

In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, Bierce joined the Ninth Indiana Infantry. He fought at the battles of Shiloh, Chickamunga, and Pickett’s Mill, and worked as a topographer making maps for strategic purposes.

The Civil War gave Bierce much of the material he would use in writing many of his short stories, including “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” His anthology *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* was published in 1891. After the Civil War, Bierce worked as a treasury agent in Alabama and for the U.S. Mint in San Francisco, where he met Mark Twain. In 1868, he became the editor of the San Francisco *News-Letter* and started a column called “The Town Crier,” which became his satirical pulpit.

On Christmas Day, 1871, Bierce married Mary Ellen Day. A year later, they moved to England. Bierce and his wife had three children together. In 1877, he began writing another satirical column called “Prattle,” which would move from publication to publication until William Randolph Hearst asked him to write for the San Francisco *Examiner* in 1886. Bierce and his wife separated in 1888, and his first son, Day, died in 1889, followed by his second son, Leigh, in 1901.

In 1909, Bierce left the *Examiner* and traveled to Mexico to report on or join in its revolution. His last correspondence was written on December 26, 1913; however, no further word was ever heard from him.

# An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

## Plot Summary

Part I details the pending execution of a man by a group of soldiers. There is considerable description of the surroundings of the bridge, the soldiers watching and preparing for the task, and of the sensory perceptions of the man about to be executed, right up to the moment where the sergeant moves aside to allow the hanging to begin.

In Part II, the reader learns that the man, Peyton Farquhar, is a Southern planter who, for reasons not explained, could not fight in the Civil War. Farquhar remains at home and operates his plantation. One day, he is approached by a Confederate soldier, a Federal spy in disguise. The soldier suggests that he blow up a bridge to halt the Union's advance. Farquhar tries this espionage, fails the attempt, and is caught by the Union forces.

Part III describes a vivid hallucination Farquhar has between the time that his execution is initiated and when his neck breaks from the force of the rope. He imagines that the rope breaks, he falls into the water, and escapes by swimming to the safety of the southern side of the stream. Farquhar then imagines that he reaches land and walks back home to be reunited with his wife. It is revealed at the end of the section that Farquhar's escape was imagined. The execution was successful, and Farquhar hangs beneath the Owl Creek Bridge.

### Activities

1. Compose a “found” poem from “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.” A “found” poem is a poem made up entirely of phrases or quotations found in the text. Go back through the story, and make a found poem of your own using Parts I and III. The poem could say something about Farquhar’s emotional state, but this is not necessary; it may be totally unrelated to the action of the story.

Your poem should be at least 10 lines long. The lines do not need to rhyme, but they certainly may. You may arrange the phrases in any way you like and change the punctuation, but do not deviate from Bierce’s actual words. Give the poem a title, which may or may not come from the book.

Below is an example taken entirely from Part II:

#### Driftwood

It comes to all in wartime,  
the opportunity for distinction.  
That gallant army!  
No adventure too perilous;  
The larger life of a soldier.

“The commandant has issued an order.  
I saw the order.  
I was there a month ago.”

A civilian hanging,  
Caught interfering with the railroad.  
A great quantity of driftwood  
would burn like tinder.

The soldier drank.  
All is fair in love and war.  
He was a Federal scout.

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