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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Great Stories of Horror and Suspense

(Ed.) Paul D. Moliken

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Great Stories of Horror and Suspense

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. define the elements of Gothic fiction and identify these elements within a given story of the genre.
2. identify a work of social satire and explain how an author might use satire to mock or ridicule society.
3. identify and explain primary and secondary themes in a given work of literature.
4. distinguish between the mood of a story and the author's tone.
5. differentiate between types of narration and identify an unreliable narrator.
6. explain the significance of the title in a given short story.
7. analyze evidence in a ghost story to determine whether supernatural events have occurred, or whether rational explanations are more plausible.
8. define the importance of setting in a given story.
9. define the following literary elements and point out examples of each: allusion, anthropomorphism, dialect, foreshadowing, hyperbole, imagery, irony, metaphor, motif, personification, simile, and symbolism.
10. define the vocabulary words listed in the study guide.
11. compare and contrast two short stories with regard to character development, plot, and climax.
12. identify ambiguous moral situations and utilize philosophical thinking in order to arrive at a judgment.
13. differentiate between a character deserving of the reader's sympathy and who is not.
14. search back through a text in order to identify clues which the author may have inserted to affect a surprise ending.

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by Ambrose Bierce

Published in 1890, and set during the American Civil War, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” describes the frightening and surreal plight of Peyton Farquhar, a civilian loyalist to the Confederacy who is being hanged by the Federal army for conspiring to burn down Owl Creek Bridge. The story begins as Farquhar stands on a plank of the bridge with his hands tied behind his back and a noose around his neck, awaiting his punishment. The hanging order is given, and from this point we are plunged, along with Peyton Farquhar, into what may be an amazing stroke of luck or a surreal dream. It seems that the rope has broken, and Peyton has fallen down through the bridge into the river below, but has he really escaped the hanging?

Bierce takes the reader along a journey into Farquhar’s thought processes and sensory perceptions. If we read carefully, we may find ourselves doubting the reality of Farquhar’s impressions. Be on the lookout for many clues which Bierce includes throughout the story which suddenly become obvious in light of the surprise ending.

As in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, many of Bierce’s stories are set during the American Civil War and deal with the psychological impact of war. Bierce infuses the story with what appears to be his own cynicism regarding war in general. Bierce himself served with distinction in the Civil War and, therefore, witnessed the horrors of war first-hand.

protuberance – a swelling or bulge
rapidity – speed, swiftness
scrutinize – to inspect or examine
stockinet – a type of stretchy knitted fabric
superintendence – management, supervision
tranquilly – calmly, coolly
trebled – tripled
triplicate – pertaining to a set of three
tumult – uproar, commotion
unwieldy – awkward, cumbersome
vacantly – blankly, expressionlessly
virulence – hostility
whetting – sharpening, honing

1. Describe Hop-Frog. How did he get his name?

2. An allusion is a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader will recognize. Identify at least two allusions from the first page of the story. How do these allusions work to describe the character of the king?

3. In the first several paragraphs of the story, the narrator uses wit and sarcasm to slyly insult the king and his ministers. Find examples of such statements.

4. Although Hop-Frog is crippled, he has great physical strength and ability with regard to a certain activity. What is this activity? Because of his ability, what animal or animals does Hop-Frog resemble, according to the narrator?

12. What image does the narrator see in the white patch of fur on the cat's breast? Is the image really there, or could it be, like the image on the wall, another hallucination on the narrator's part? Whether real or imaginary, why does the image terrify the narrator so much?

13. Describe the scene on the basement stairs involving the narrator, his wife, and the cat.

14. After killing his wife, does the narrator experience any remorse? Does the narrator have any conscience left at all at this point?

15. How does the narrator conceal his wife's body?

16. What circumstance fills the narrator with happiness and relief in the days after the murder?

17. Describe the narrator's behavior when the police come to inspect the basement. What compels the narrator to detain the police as they are leaving?

2. When the narrator meets the signal-man for the first time, the signal-man behaves oddly. What is unusual about the signal-man's behavior?

3. What does the signal-man's job entail?

4. While observing the signal-man at his job, what are the narrator's first impressions with regard to the signal-man's professionalism? What odd behavior does the signal-man exhibit which makes the narrator question the signal-man's professionalism?

5. During the narrator's second visit, the signal-man explains to the narrator why he is so distressed. What is the first thing the signal-man relates regarding his distress?

6. The signal-man goes on to recount a chilling incident which happened one moonlit night. Describe this incident.

7. Does the narrator believe that the signal-man saw something supernatural? What is the narrator's explanation for the mysterious figure?
