

THE MULHERN STORY LIBRARY — SALON READING GUIDE

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Ambrose Bierce · American Realism / Civil War · first published 1890

AUTHOR	Ambrose Bierce
PUBLISHED	1890
ERA	American Realism / Civil War
THEMES	War, Time, Illusion
READER PATHWAY	College seminar / adult discussion

INTRODUCTION FOR THOUGHTFUL READERS

A Southern planter about to be hanged by Union soldiers seems to escape when the rope breaks, fleeing through forest and river toward home. The vivid escape is revealed to be a final fantasy in the instant before his death.

HISTORICAL & LITERARY CONTEXT

First published in the San Francisco Examiner in 1890 and collected in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, the story is celebrated for its manipulation of time and its early use of a shocking twist ending grounded in psychological realism.

DISCUSSION FOCUS

Manipulation of narrative time, point of view shifts, the twist ending, and the unreliability of perception. Excellent for examining structure, wartime imagination, and the limits of heroic self-conception.

SALON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Bierce use altered time to reveal the mind's resistance to death?
- What critique of romanticized war emerges through Farquhar's fantasy of escape?

READ & RESEARCH

1. Full text at Wikisource — https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Occurrence_at_Owl_Creek_Bridge
2. The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce at Project Gutenberg — <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4366>