

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by

### Ambrose Bierce

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### Book Information

Ambrose Bierce, An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

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During the United States Civil War, a condemned man has many thoughts as he stands on a bridge, awaiting hanging.

**Topics:** Adventure, Escape; Classics, Classics (All); Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All); Wars, American Civil War

### Main Characters

Federal scout a Union soldier disguised as a Confederate who gives Farquhar the idea to disable the railroad bridge at Owl Creek

Federal soldiers soldiers for the Union army, the North

Peyton Farquhar a civilian planter from an old and respected Alabama family, who is devoted to the Southern cause

### Vocabulary

**acclivity** an upward slope, usually near a stream or running water

**grapeshot** small iron balls designed to scatter in the air when shot from a gun

**periodicity** a recurrence at regular intervals

**secessionist** a person or a group who wishes to withdraw from a place or an idea

**tow** coarse fibers of hemp or flax

### Synopsis

As the story opens, Peyton Farquhar, a well-to-do plantation owner and secessionist devoted to the Southern cause, is being prepared for hanging by Federal troops for attempting to sabotage the repaired railroad at Owl Creek bridge. They are thirty miles from Farquhar's plantation in northern

Alabama, where Farquhar lived with his wife, children, and slaves.

A flashback reveals Farquhar and his wife were sitting in front of their plantation when a soldier wearing the grey of the South arrived and asked for a glass of water. The scout gave Farquhar the idea to destroy the Owl Creek bridge, which had been repaired for the Federal railroad. Unaware the soldier was actually a Federal scout, Farquhar discussed the idea with him.

Returning to the present action, Farquhar stands with the rope encircling his neck; his hands are behind his back with wrists bound. He imagines his escape. Farquhar closes his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. As he waits, his senses become sharper. He falls straight downward through the bridge and loses consciousness.

His power of thought is restored, and as he fights his way up to the surface of the water he thinks, "To be hanged and drowned, that is not so bad, but I do not want to be shot." He unties his wrists and lifts the noose from around his neck. He comes to the surface facing downstream, and he sees the Federal soldiers shoot at him. He hears their fire and feels the spattering of the water as the bullets hit the water. As he hears the call to fire again, Farquhar dives as deeply as he can. He knows that he cannot dodge all of the bullets. Soon cannon fire is felt in the water. Somehow he eludes the cannon fire and finds himself on the river bank. He makes his way through the forest and continues to travel despite extreme physical distress. Finally, he is at his home gate. He sees his wife, but just before he takes her in his arms, he feels a blow upon the back of his neck.

Farquhar's imagined escape is over, and his lifeless body swings from the rope tied to the Owl Creek bridge.

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## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Discuss the escape plan that Farquhar imagines. Give details as to why realistically it would or would not work. Could he have survived the tilt of the plank and the drop into the water? Why or why not?

*The escape plan could work if everything went according to Farquhar's plan and if he knew the area well. On the other hand, the escape plan is unlikely. Farquhar's surviving the fall is doubtful, and his dodging the bullets and evading so many soldiers is unlikely as well.*

### Literary Analysis

According to the story, the Owl Creek bridge is a key repair point for the Federal rail system. Think about different kinds of transportation systems used during the Civil War. Which kind of system would be most valuable for the shipment of goods and troops?

*Other systems were needed since rail systems had not yet been laid everywhere. Other transportation modes were horses, wagons, boats, and walking. The railroads gave the North strength because of the massive numbers of troops and equipment that could be transported.*

## Inferential Comprehension

Peyton Farquhar is sentenced to death for his treasonous intentions and past actions. Think about our civil and criminal justice system. How might this justice system change during war time? Discuss how an act might be considered treasonous during war, but not treasonous during peacetime. Give specific examples to support your ideas. Is it just for Farquhar, as a civilian, to be hung for his actions?

*During peacetime an act may be defined as a criminal act, while during war the same act may be defined as treason. An act against one's country is perceived as a larger crime than the same act against an individual, a group, or an owner's property. Treasonous acts may affect more lives ultimately and, in the past, were often punishable by death.*

## Constructing Meaning

Most of the story centers on Farquhar's thoughts as he is being hanged. Imagine the thoughts of a person waiting to die. What do these people probably think about?

*Most individuals would probably think about their cause, the past, their family, their crime, an escape, or what could have been. Individuals would have varying responses in preparing for death ranging from pride to regret, joy to sorrow, hope to despair.*

## Teachable Skills

**Identifying Persuasive Language** During the 1850's and 1860's, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas were great debaters. Have students research the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Have two teams of students prepare a debate, with one group taking the viewpoint of Lincoln and the other taking the viewpoint of Douglas. Support each of these views of slavery according to the time in which it was presented. Have two students play the roles of Lincoln and Douglas, while the rest of the class can be the audience who would have attended the original debates. Also invite several neutral guests to join the audience. The audience can then ask questions

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about the subject. After the debates, have the neutral guests vote for Lincoln or Douglas.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The Civil War was fueled largely by the interests of Southern plantation owners like Peyton Farquhar. Have students research what crops plantation owners in Alabama grew in the late 1850's and the 1860's. Have students chart their information. Some items charted could be length of growing seasons, cash crops, and crops grown for home use by the residents of the plantation. They could continue charting items such as average number of acres for a plantation, average number of slaves on a plantation, and any other facts from the research that would make each student's chart unique.

**Making Predictions** Farquhar's death is a shocking disappointment to the reader. Though the story is well crafted, some students may enjoy writing a new ending for the story. Have students write out in detail what would happen if Farquhar had returned to the plantation.

**Describing Actions or Events** Ask the students to write an obituary for Farquhar that would be printed in the local newspaper. Have students use facts and events from the story. They may create the point of view as if the newspaper is either in Southern control or has been taken over by Federal troops.