

## Literature of the Civil War

# An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Short Story by Ambrose Bierce



**READING 2C** Relate the main ideas found in a literary work to primary source documents from its historical and cultural setting. **5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the plot and setting in works of fiction. **5B** Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices.

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML11-602A

### Meet the Author

## Ambrose Bierce 1842–c. 1914

As a Civil War soldier, Ambrose Bierce was an eyewitness to the harsh realities of war. The brutal contrast between soldiers' dreams of glory and the senselessness of warfare became a recurring theme in Bierce's postwar short stories, including his suspenseful tale "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

**In the Line of Fire** Born into a poor, intensely religious family, Bierce spent his early years on an Indiana farm. At age 15, he left home for a job at a newspaper, where he set type. Three years later, the Civil War broke out, and the idealistic Bierce immediately volunteered for the Union army. Fighting in some of the war's bloodiest battles, Bierce watched many of his comrades die and nearly died himself from a head wound.

When the war was over, Bierce moved to San Francisco, which was then the literary center of the West. Determined to become a writer, Bierce took a job as a night watchman, which allowed him ample time for reading and for polishing his writing skills. He started writing a regular newspaper column and became infamous for exposing bigotry, hypocrisy, and corruption with razor-sharp satire. His cutting wit earned him the title "the Wickedest

Man in San Francisco." Such a reputation delighted Bierce, who kept on his desk a human skull that he claimed belonged to one of his critics.

**A Morbid Imagination** Bierce began publishing short stories in the 1870s, when realism was becoming the dominant literary style in American fiction. Although Bierce's true-to-life war stories inspired realist writers like Stephen Crane, his fiction often included surreal or ghostly events. Like Edgar Allan Poe, to whom he was often compared, Bierce was fascinated with strange and horrible deaths, and he described them with his characteristic dark humor and a sense of irony. Bierce also went beyond realism in his experiments with narration, pioneering the use of multiple points of view in a single story.

**Vanished** At 71, Bierce revisited Civil War battle sites where he had fought and then went to Mexico to report on the Mexican Revolution as an observer with Pancho Villa's rebel army. He never returned to the United States, and no trace of him was found. Before he left, he wrote to a niece, "If you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags, please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease or falling down the cellar stairs."

### Author Online

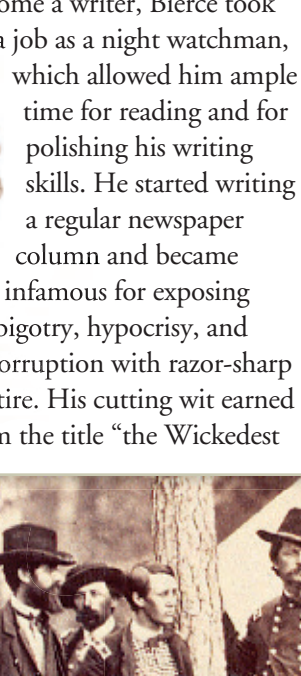
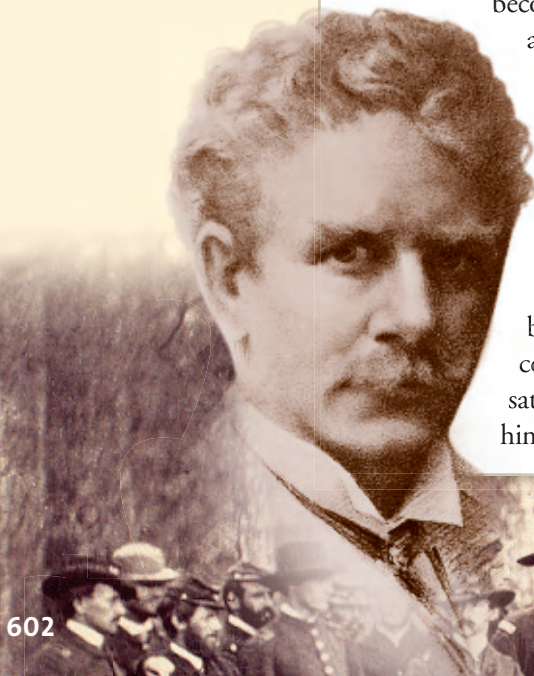
Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML11-602B



### DID YOU KNOW?

Ambrose Bierce . . .

- was one of 13 children, whose names all began with the letter A.
- was awarded 15 commendations for bravery under fire.
- was nicknamed Bitter Bierce for his cynical humor and cruel wit.
- also wrote under the names Mrs. J. Milton Bowers and Dod Grile.



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: POINT OF VIEW

Because the narrator is the voice that tells a story, the reader knows only what the narrator is able to tell. Therefore, the narrator's point of view greatly affects the story's events as well as the internal and external development of characters. Types of **point of view** include

- **first person:** told by a character in the work whose knowledge is limited to his or her own experiences
- **third-person omniscient:** told by a voice outside the story who reveals the thoughts and feelings of all the characters
- **third-person limited:** told by a voice outside the story who focuses on one character's thoughts and feelings

As you read, look for clues in the narration that help identify the point of view in Ambrose Bierce's story.

## READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE

To analyze the **structure** of a literary work, you examine the relationship between its parts and its content. This story is divided into three numbered sections, each of which occurs at a different point in time. After you read each section, summarize the events that occur and note when they take place. Use a chart like the one shown to record your notes.

	<i>What Happens</i>	<i>When</i>
<i>Section 1</i>		

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Bierce used the words in Column A in his tale of a man facing death. Test your knowledge by matching each vocabulary word with its synonym in Column B.

### Column A

1. interminable
2. poignant
3. ineffable
4. summarily
5. oscillation
6. ludicrous
7. presaging

### Column B

- a. swaying
- b. painful
- c. predicting
- d. unending
- e. indescribable
- f. immediately
- g. laughable

## Can we escape the INEVITABLE?

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" opens with an execution about to take place. Standing on an isolated, heavily guarded bridge, with a noose around his neck, the protagonist is doomed. There is no escape. Or is there?

**DISCUSS** In a small group, list ways people respond when faced with a bad situation they cannot change. Classify each response as useful or destructive. When does it make sense to look for a way out, and when is it time to accept the inevitable?



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

# An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

*Ambrose Bierce*

## I

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the sleepers<sup>1</sup> supporting the metals of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his  
10 rifle in the position known as “support,” that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest—a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it. **A**

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground—a gentle acclivity<sup>2</sup> topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loopholed for rifles,  
20 with a single embrasure<sup>3</sup> through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway of the slope between bridge and fort were the spectators—a single company of infantry in line, at “parade rest,” the butts of the rifles on the ground, the barrels inclining slightly backward against the right

## Analyze Visuals ►

Based on this image, what do you predict will happen in the story?

## **A** POINT OF VIEW

Identify the point of view used in lines 1–15. What does the **tone** of the description tell you about the narrator's perspective?

1. **sleepers:** railroad ties.

2. **acclivity:** an upward slope.

3. **embrasure:** a flared opening in a wall for a gun, with sides angled so that the inside opening is larger than that on the outside.









shoulder, the hands crossed upon the stock.<sup>4</sup> A lieutenant stood at the right of the line, the point of his sword upon the ground, his left hand resting upon his right. Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, but making  
30 no sign. Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.

The man who was engaged in being hanged was apparently about thirty-five years of age. He was a civilian, if one might judge from his habit, which was that of a planter. His features were good—a straight nose, firm mouth, broad forehead, from which his long, dark hair was combed straight back, falling behind his ears to the collar of his well-fitting frock-coat. He wore a mustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large and dark gray, and had a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp.  
40 Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded.

The preparations being complete, the two private soldiers stepped aside and each drew away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in

### Language Coach

#### Topically Related Words

Read lines 30–32. Look up *dignitary*, *etiquette*, and *deference* in a dictionary. How is each word related to the ideas of formality or respect?

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4. **stock**: the wooden part of the rifle that serves as a handle.

turn moved apart one pace. These movements left the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the two ends of the same plank, which spanned three of the cross-ties of the bridge. The end upon which the civilian stood almost, but not quite, reached a fourth. This plank had been held in place by the weight of the captain; it was now held by that of the sergeant. At a signal from the former the  
50 latter would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between two ties. The arrangement commended itself to his judgment as simple and effective. His face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged. He looked a moment at his “unsteadfast footing,” then let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream! **B**

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift—all  
60 had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was a sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith’s hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or near by—it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell.<sup>5</sup> He awaited each stroke with impatience and—he knew not why—apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like the thrust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard  
70 was the ticking of his watch.

He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. “If I could free my hands,” he thought, “I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader’s farthest advance.”

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man’s brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside. **C**

## II

Peyton Farquhar was a well-to-do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama  
80 family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause. Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with the gallant army that had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth,<sup>6</sup> and he chafed under the

### **B POINT OF VIEW**

Note that the third-person point of view narrows from omniscient to limited. What **sensory details** alert you to this change in perspective?

### **C ANALYZE STRUCTURE**

If the story were told in chronological order, what would you expect to happen next?

5. **the tolling of a death knell:** the slow, steady ringing of a bell at a funeral or to indicate death.

6. **Corinth:** a town in Mississippi that was the site of a Civil War battle in 1862.

inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction. That opportunity, he felt, would come, as it comes to all in war time. Meanwhile he did what he could. No service was too humble for him to perform in aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.

One evening while Farquhar and his wife were sitting on a rustic bench near the entrance to his grounds, a gray-clad soldier rode up to the gate and asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Farquhar was only too happy to serve him with her own white hands. While she was fetching the water her husband approached the dusty horseman and inquired eagerly for news from the front.

“The Yanks are repairing the railroads,” said the man, “and are getting ready for another advance. They have reached the Owl Creek bridge, put it in order and built a stockade on the north bank. The commandant has issued an order, which is posted everywhere, declaring that any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels or trains will be **summarily** hanged. I saw the order.” **D**

“How far is it to the Owl Creek bridge?” Farquhar asked.

“About thirty miles.”

“Is there no force on this side the creek?”

“Only a picket post<sup>7</sup> half a mile out, on the railroad, and a single sentinel at this end of the bridge.”

“Suppose a man—a civilian and student of hanging—should elude the picket post and perhaps get the better of the sentinel,” said Farquhar, smiling, “what could he accomplish?”

110 The soldier reflected. “I was there a month ago,” he replied. “I observed that the flood of last winter had lodged a great quantity of driftwood against the wooden pier at this end of the bridge. It is now dry and would burn like tow.”<sup>8</sup>

The lady had now brought the water, which the soldier drank. He thanked her ceremoniously, bowed to her husband and rode away. An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come. He was a Federal scout. **E**

### III

As Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge he lost consciousness and was as one already dead. From this state he was awakened—ages later, it seemed to him—by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen, **poignant** agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fiber of his body and limbs. These pains appeared to flash along well-defined lines of ramification<sup>9</sup> and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating

**summarily** (sə-mĕr'ə-lē) *adv.* quickly and without ceremony

#### **D ANALYZE STRUCTURE**

Compare lines 97–101 with the description in lines 1–21. What details connect these two sections of the story?

#### **E POINT OF VIEW**

Reread lines 113–116. Explain what the reader knows that Peyton Farquhar does not. Which type of third-person point of view allows the author to give the reader details that are hidden from the characters?

**poignant** (poin'yənt) *adj.* physically or mentally painful

7. **picket post**: the camp of soldiers who are assigned to guard against a surprise attack.

8. **tow** (tō): coarse, dry fiber.

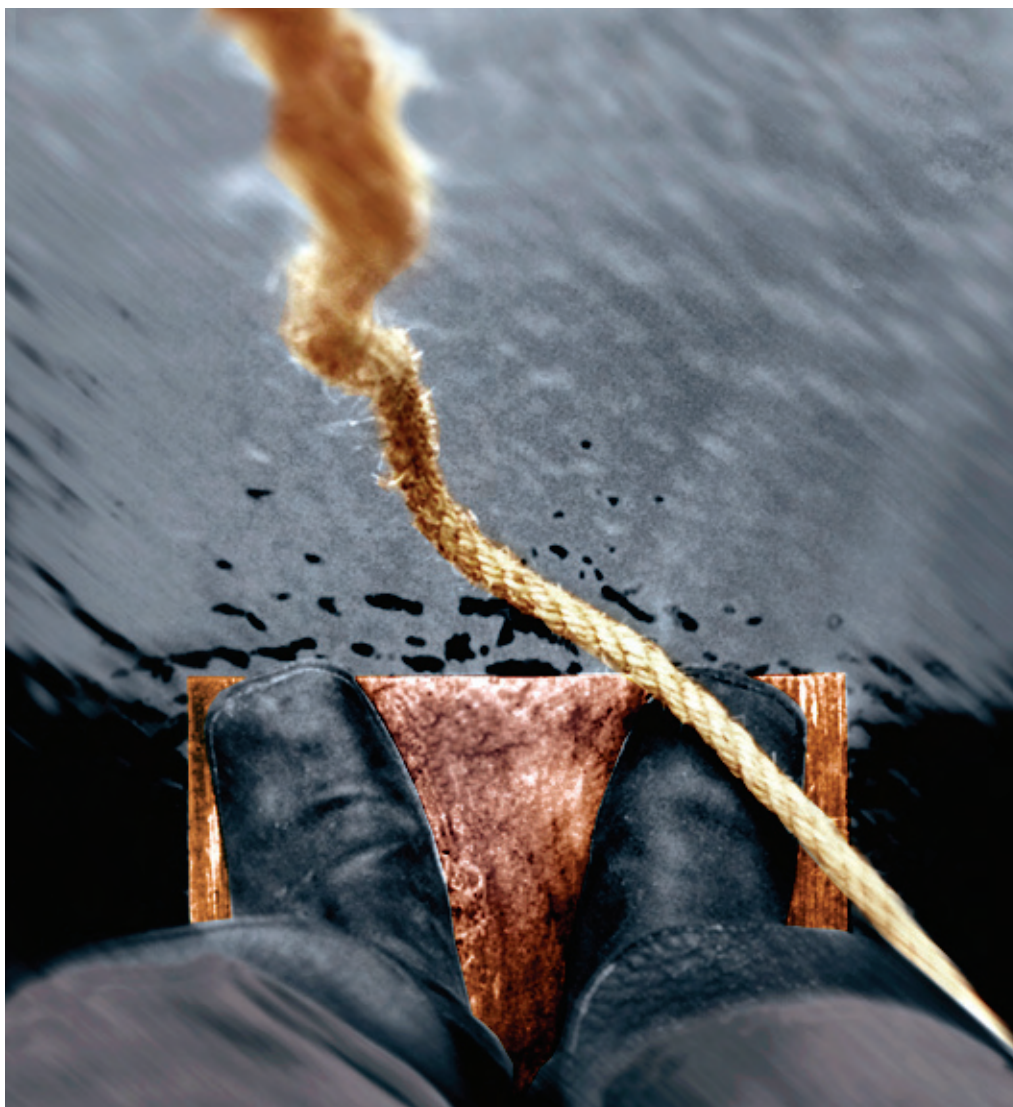
9. **flash . . . ramification**: spread out rapidly along branches from a central point.



him to an intolerable temperature. As to his head, he was conscious of nothing but a feeling of fullness—of congestion. These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment. He was conscious of motion. Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of **oscillation**, like a vast  
130 pendulum. Then all at once, with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river!—the idea seemed to him **ludicrous**. He opened his eyes in the darkness and saw above him a gleam

**oscillation** (ŏs'ə-lā'shən)  
*n.* the action of swinging back and forth

**ludicrous** (lōō'dĭ-kres)  
*adj.* laughably absurd; ridiculous



### ◀ Analyze Visuals

Whose point of view does the image reflect? What details can you not see when limited to this point of view?



of light, but how distant, how inaccessible! He was still sinking, for the light became fainter and fainter until it was a mere glimmer. Then it began to grow and brighten, and he knew that he was rising toward the surface—knew it with  
140 reluctance, for he was now very comfortable. “To be hanged and drowned,” he thought, “that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be shot. No; I will not be shot; that is not fair.”

He was not conscious of an effort, but a sharp pain in his wrist apprised him that he was trying to free his hands. He gave the struggle his attention, as an idler might observe the feat of a juggler, without interest in the outcome. What splendid effort!—what magnificent, what superhuman strength! Ah, that was a fine endeavor! Bravo! The cord fell away; his arms parted and floated upward, the hands dimly seen on each side in the growing light. He watched them with a new interest as first one and then the other pounced upon the noose at his neck.  
150 They tore it away and thrust it fiercely aside, its undulations resembling those of a water-snake. “Put it back, put it back!” He thought he shouted these words to his hands, for the undoing of the noose had been succeeded by the direst pang that he had yet experienced. His neck ached horribly; his brain was on fire; his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth. His whole body was racked and wrenched with an insupportable anguish!<sup>10</sup> But his disobedient hands gave no heed to the command. They beat the water vigorously with quick, downward strokes, forcing him to the surface. He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great  
160 draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek! **F**

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of  
170 the stream, the beating of the dragon-flies’ wings, the strokes of the water-spiders’ legs, like oars which had lifted their boat—all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water.

He had come to the surface facing down the stream; in a moment the visible world seemed to wheel slowly round, himself the pivotal point, and he saw the bridge, the fort, the soldiers upon the bridge, the captain, the sergeant, the two privates, his executioners. They were in silhouette against the blue sky. They shouted and gesticulated, pointing at him. The captain had drawn his pistol, but did not fire; the others were unarmed. Their movements were grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic.



TEKS 5B

**F CHARACTERIZATION**

**Characterization** refers to the techniques a writer uses to develop characters. With third-person limited point of view, Bierce can observe his main character from a distance, as he does in the first two parts of this story, conveying character externally through details of action and dialogue. In Part III, however, the point of view shifts to record the sensations and emotions of Peyton Farquhar’s inner life. Reread lines 143–160. What details does the author use to capture the panic of a man in danger of drowning? How do these details contribute to character development? Cite evidence from the paragraph to support your response.

10. **racked . . . anguish:** stretched and twisted with unendurable physical pain.

180 Suddenly he heard a sharp report and something struck the water smartly within a few inches of his head, spattering his face with spray. He heard a second report, and saw one of the sentinels with his rifle at his shoulder, a light cloud of blue smoke rising from the muzzle. The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest, and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

A counter-swirl had caught Farquhar and turned him half round; he was again looking into the forest on the bank opposite the fort. The sound of a clear, high voice in a monotonous singsong now rang out behind him and came across the  
190 water with a distinctness that pierced and subdued all other sounds, even the beating of the ripples in his ears. Although no soldier, he had frequented camps enough to know the dread significance of that deliberate, drawling, aspirated chant; the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work. How coldly and pitilessly—with what an even, calm intonation, **presaging**, and enforcing tranquillity in the men—with what accurately measured intervals fell those cruel words:

“Attention, company! . . . Shoulder arms! . . . Ready! . . . Aim! . . . Fire!”



### Language Coach

#### Multiple-Meaning Words

*Report* (line 180) is a **multiple-meaning word**, a word with more than one meaning. In this context, *report* means “loud, explosive noise.” With a partner, identify the words in the paragraph that point to the appropriate meaning of this word.

**presaging** (prēs'ij-ĭng)  
*adj.* predicting **presage** *v.*

Farquhar dived—dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara, yet he heard the dulled thunder of the volley and, rising  
200 again toward the surface, met shining bits of metal, singularly flattened, oscillating slowly downward. Some of them touched him on the face and hands, then fell away, continuing their descent. One lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm and he snatched it out.

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water; he was perceptibly farther down stream—nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; the metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine as they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming  
210 vigorously with the current. His brain was as energetic as his arms and legs; he thought with the rapidity of lightning.

“The officer,” he reasoned, “will not make that martinet’s<sup>11</sup> error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot. He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them all!”

An appalling splash within two yards of him was followed by a loud, rushing sound, *diminuendo*,<sup>12</sup> which seemed to travel back through the air to the fort and died in an explosion which stirred the very river to its depths! A rising sheet of water curved over him, fell down upon him, blinded him, strangled him! The cannon had taken a hand in the game. As he shook his head free from the  
220 commotion of the smitten water he heard the deflected shot humming through the air ahead, and in an instant it was cracking and smashing the branches in the forest beyond.

“They will not do that again,” he thought; “the next time they will use a charge of grape.<sup>13</sup> I must keep my eye upon the gun; the smoke will apprise me—the report arrives too late; it lags behind the missile. That is a good gun.”

Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round—spinning like a top. The water, the banks, the forests, the now distant bridge, fort and men—all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color—that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex  
230 and was being whirled on with a velocity of advance and gyration that made him giddy and sick. In a few moments he was flung upon the gravel at the foot of the left bank of the stream—the southern bank—and behind a projecting point which concealed him from his enemies. The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him, and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he

### Language Coach

**Formal Language** Read lines 210–211. Note the words “with the rapidity of lightning.” Now, compare those words with these: “with lightning-fast speed.” Which phrase do you find more formal? Consider both word order and word choice.



TEKS 2B

### THEME AND GENRE

The structure of Bierce’s story, in which events are not told in chronological order, is similar to the narrative technique employed by Charles Frazier in his 1997 Civil War novel, *Cold Mountain*, which was made into a film in 2003. The novel alternates between the stories of the two main characters, lovers who are separated by war. What are other examples of twentieth-century novels, plays, or films that use this non-sequential method of storytelling?

11. **martinet’s**: alluding to a strict disciplinarian or person who demands that regulations be followed exactly.

12. **diminuendo** (dĭ-mĭn’yoō-ĕn’dō) *Italian*: gradually decreasing in loudness.

13. **grape**: short for grapeshot, a cluster of several small iron balls fired in one shot from a cannon.





noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind  
 240 made in their branches the music of æolian harps.<sup>14</sup> He had no wish to perfect his escape—was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

A whiz and rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head roused him from his dream. The baffled cannoneer had fired him a random farewell. He sprang to his feet, rushed up the sloping bank, and plunged into the forest.

All that day he traveled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed **interminable**; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.

### ▲ Analyze Visuals

Compare this image with the description given in lines 237–240. What associations does each scene call to mind?

**interminable**

(ĩn-tûr'mə-nə-bol)

*adj.* endless

14. **music of æolian** (ě-ō'lě-ən) **harps**: heavenly, or unearthly, music.

By night fall he was fatigued, footsore, famishing. The thought of his wife  
250 and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he  
knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it  
seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as  
the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. 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 in perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this  
rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in  
strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had  
a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular  
noises, among which—once, twice, and again, he distinctly heard whispers in an  
260 unknown tongue.

His neck was in pain and lifting his hand to it he found it horribly swollen.  
He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt  
congested; he could no longer close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he  
relieved its fever by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cold air.  
How softly the turf had carpeted the untraveled avenue—he could no longer feel  
the roadway beneath his feet!

Doubtless, despite his suffering, he had fallen asleep while walking, for now he  
sees another scene—perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium. He stands  
at the gate of his own home. All is as he left it, and all bright and beautiful in the  
270 morning sunshine. He must have traveled the entire night. As he pushes open  
the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments;  
his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet  
him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of **ineffable** joy,  
an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs  
forward with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow  
upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a  
sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence! **G**

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from  
side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge. **H**

**ineffable** (ĭn-ĕf'ə-bəl)  
*adj.* beyond description;  
inexpressible



TEKS 2B, 2C

**G PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS**

Reread lines 270–279, and think about the main idea that is revealed by the changing point of view at the end. How do Peyton Farquhar's thoughts relate to those expressed in the **primary source** "Letter to Sarah Ballou," which you read earlier in this unit (page 594)? Remember that Sullivan Ballou was killed in battle about a week after writing the letter to his wife.

**H TEXT STRUCTURE**

*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is a classic example of a story whose plot is structured to deliver a surprise ending. Such endings have the power to overturn all previous notions about the story. Two 21st-century examples of this device can be found in the films *The Others* (2001) and *The Notebook* (2004). What surprise endings or intriguing plot twists can you cite from other works?

## Comprehension

1. **Summarize** What is Peyton Farquhar's background?
2. **Recall** How does Farquhar die?
3. **Clarify** Why did the soldier who visited Farquhar give him such detailed information about the bridge?



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the plot and setting in works of fiction. **5B** Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** What is the Union soldiers' reason for hanging Farquhar? Cite evidence to support your inference.
5. **Analyze Structure** Review the chart you created as you read. How would the story be different if it were told in chronological order?
6. **Examine Point of View** Citing at least two examples from the story, explain how the shifts in point of view affect the level of **suspense**. What would be different about the story if it were told entirely from the **third-person omniscient** point of view?
7. **Make Inferences about Character Development** Bierce uses sensory details to suggest Farquhar's state of mind. In each of the following episodes, what sensory details suggest that Farquhar's perceptions may be unreliable?
  - on the bridge (lines 60–70)
  - in the river (lines 161–172)
  - reaching land (lines 231–240)
  - in the woods (lines 255–260)
8. **Interpret Themes** Reread lines 80–91. Based on Farquhar's dreams of glory and his ultimate fate, what point might Bierce be making about
  - heroism
  - the realities of war
  - the dangers of fantasy
9. **Evaluate Narrative Devices** In your opinion, did Bierce intend Farquhar's **escape** to seem believable? Cite textual evidence to support your view.

## Literary Criticism

10. **Author's Style** Compare Bierce's use of realistic and fantastic elements in this story. Which label—realistic or fantastic—best describes Bierce's style? Support your answer with details.

### *Can we escape the* **INEVITABLE?**

As Peyton Farquhar awaited his fate on the bridge, his mind began to wander toward the possibility of escape. Was he giving rational consideration to escape, or was his mind merely “killing time”? Do you think his thoughts were useful or destructive? Why?



## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Decide whether these statements using the vocabulary words are true or false.

1. A **ludicrous** TV show would probably make you cry.
2. A job that is performed **summarily** tends to take a long time.
3. An **ineffable** pleasure is likely to leave you speechless with joy.
4. Climbing a very steep ladder is an example of **oscillation**.
5. You would typically describe a standup comic's performance as **poignant**.
6. Messages **presaging** happiness tend to make a fortuneteller popular.
7. If a school day seems **interminable**, it feels like it will never be over.

#### WORD LIST

ineffable  
interminable  
ludicrous  
oscillation  
poignant  
presaging  
summarily

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• conflict • create • element • emphasis • perspective

An easily overlooked **element** of this story is the fact that Peyton Farquhar, a civilian, was “set up” by a Federal scout posing as a Confederate soldier. Write a paragraph from the **perspective** of the scout, justifying the deceit that resulted in Farquhar's death. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE LATIN ROOT *lud*

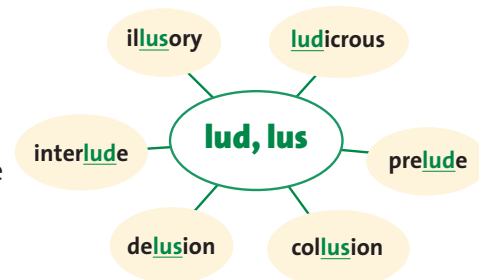
The vocabulary word *ludicrous* contains the root *lud*, meaning “play.” This root, which may also be spelled *lus*, has its origin in Latin, the language of ancient Rome. *Lud* or *lus* is found in a number of English words from a variety of content areas. To understand words with *lud* or *lus*, use your knowledge of the origin of the root and its meaning, as well as context clues.

**PRACTICE** Choose the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Consider what you know about the Latin root and the context of each sentence. If necessary, consult a dictionary.

1. In the \_\_\_\_\_ between the scenes, a violinist performed for the audience.
2. He suffers from the \_\_\_\_\_ that he is a good golfer.
3. Though she dresses expensively, her wealth is more \_\_\_\_\_ than real.
4. As a \_\_\_\_\_ to the main act, a young, inexperienced band played.
5. As a result of the two guards' \_\_\_\_\_, a prisoner escaped.



**READING 1A** Determine the meaning of grade-level technical academic English words in multiple content areas derived from Latin roots and affixes.



Interactive  
Vocabulary



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML11-616

## Voices of the Civil War

Near the outbreak of the Civil War, writer Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked, “All arts disappear in the one art of war.” In other words, the necessities of warfare—military, political, economic, and social—act somehow to discourage or diminish the creation of what might be termed “serious literature.” Nevertheless, fine nonfiction writing about pressing national issues emerged in the years prior to, during, and immediately following the Civil War.

The selections beginning on page 558 include many forms of nonfiction: autobiographies, speeches, documents, letters, and diaries. Perhaps these forms served as better vehicles than poems or short stories might have for the people of the day who wanted to explore their personal responses to the war. In any case, the nonfiction here is valuable for several reasons:

- It gives readers a glimpse into the events and culture of the writers’ troubled time.
- It provides each writer’s personal response to what was happening all around.
- It presents a good overview of the many different factions that made up the country at the time.

### Writing to Synthesize

Write an essay describing both the historical and personal insights you gained from reading the nonfiction in this unit.

#### Consider

- the historical facts you learned from the selections (important figures, dates, battles, and so forth)
- the personal concerns of the writers (their opinions, worries, pride, and so forth)
- what you can infer about the country as a whole from the many voices of its writers



*Lincoln at Gettysburg II* (1939–1942), William H. Johnson. Gouache and pen and ink on paper, 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>” × 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>”.

### Extension

#### LISTENING & SPEAKING

Examine the image of Lincoln shown here. Based on your reading and your prior knowledge of President Lincoln, give a brief **oral critique** of how he is portrayed in this painting. Discuss the style of the work as a whole, Lincoln’s placement in relation to other figures in the painting, the colors used, and any other aspects you consider important.



**WRITING 15A** Write an analytical essay.  
**LISTENING AND SPEAKING 25** Speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language.