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English 2

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Research Paper

Oedipus the King VS. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce is a 19<sup>th</sup> Century mystery story that is set at the time of the American Civil War (1861-1865), when the Slave owning Confederate States in the South engaged in conflict with the Federal Government of the USA. The story focuses on a character called Peyton Farquhar, who was about to be hung for trespassing the Owl Creek Bridge. The story ends with a curious twist in the plot. The main aspect of the story is set in Farquhar's mind, however while reading, at the first instinct, the reader is unsure (despite careful, hidden hints placed by Bierce) of this fact. Only at the end, when it is clearly stated that Farquhar is hanging lifelessly with a broken neck from the bridge that the reader will become conclusively aware of this facet. In Oedipus the King by Sophocles', it is a 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek tragedy play that is set at the time of major battle against the Persian navy also known as Golden Age. (Sophocles, 1880) The underlying assumption in this story was that the citizens were meant to learn from the mistakes made during the tragedies. Citizens were supposed to learn the appropriate manner of being a good human being. Will the fantasy overtake their minds leaving them with one option to return to reality and death or will the power of unwritten law, the willingness to ignore the truth, and the limits of free will?

Bierce carefully divides the narrative, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, into three parts. Each part carefully intertwines the aspects of the close examination of time, the attention given to mental fiction to avoid real life, and the blending of reality and fiction. “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” begins powerfully with an unnamed protagonist. At this point, Bierce creates an atmosphere of mystery. The author only describes the problematic situation of the character, “The man’s hands were behind his back, his wrists bound with cord. A rope closely encircled his neck” (Bierce). The reader does not know it, yet the situation alludes to death. The author attempts to initiate the reader to question the man's entrapment and his ability to break away. Further, the author only details the man has committed a crime. What crime? Bierce forces the reader to continue through curiosity. The author sets no preliminaries for the actions taking place. Bierce firmly plants the reader inside the story here. During Part One, the author also shows intense time distortion. Literary critic Cathy Davidson states, “[...] it is a speculation on the nature of time and the nature of the abnormal psychology [...]” (Davidson 196). The author introduces minor thoughts of the protagonist, “[...] a piece of driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slow it appeared to move!” (Bierce). The author’s manipulation of the time allows readers to question the trivial nature of the protagonist's thoughts, as well as, to pull the reader's attention away from the reality of the time span. Bierce allows Farquhar’s stream of thoughts to tease the time. At the end of Part One, Bierce starts a dream sequence that is picked up later in the story, “If I could free my hands I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream ...” (Bierce). For that dream only could have last no more than a split second, he imagines a greatly detailed feat. Using time as the key, Bierce shows the

bridge between fantasy and reality. Through the rambling of Farquhar's thoughts, Bierce creates diversion. The attention given to Farquhar's thoughts creates an escape from reality. While looking down at the stream, why does Farquhar only notice the piece of wood? Critics such as, James G. Powers believe Bierce's technique here takes on a Freudian principle. Peyton Farquhar imposes a "temporary reality, the desires of the heart upon the true reality within the swollen moments of his post-mortem consciousness." Throughout the story, Farquhar's fantasy overlooks human possibilities and reality. By the "mixing of the external world of death with Farquhar's internal world, which cries out for life" (Davidson 169), the reader becomes less aware of the real spectrum and more closely relates personal feelings and emotions with the protagonist. The reader loses sight of clues indicating the death of Farquhar. His dream of escape is his last conscious thought. Then, he plunges to his death; nevertheless, his "post-mortem consciousness" continues to act out the fantasy. Although the author gives the protagonist supernatural characteristics such as keen hearing and seeing, the realistic nature of the story allows the reader to overlook the indication. Despite the vivid nature of the fantasy, as real as the escape seems, Farquhar's death inevitably must occur.

The strong blends of reality and fiction create a grand story. In Part Three, the narrative takes over from the end of Part One. Bierce uses hints to explain the extreme conditions of Farquhar's situation. Bierce warns the reader with comments such as, "it seemed to him..." (Bierce) that Farquhar is no longer reliable. The narrative voice becomes Latinate. The shift in voice creates a seg-way from fantasy back to reality. Part 3 suggests a somewhat after death experience: "saw above him a gleaming light...sense of suffocation...poignant agonies seemed to shoot his neck" (Bierce). Farquhar returns to

reality. Bierce's description of Farquhar's extreme agonies creates confusion for the reader. The end of the story, again, alludes to an escape. "Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forward with extended arms" (Bierce). Bierce abruptly stops his complex illusions, at this point, to illustrate the falsity of the escape. "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge" (Bierce). Cathy Davidson states, "Death is a cessation of the impression through the senses, and the pulling of the strings which move the appetites..." (Davidson 146).

To what extent is Oedipus responsible for his own fate? In looking at the play Oedipus the King, I found several possibilities surrounding his fate. Firstly, one of the assumptions that can be drawn is that perhaps as destiny controls all fates, then Oedipus' character was created long before he was conceived. On the other hand, we could also say that perhaps Oedipus' horrific fate came about because of his character. The third possibility is that everything is inevitable - therefore no one ever has had any say in their own fate, let alone Oedipus. The first explanation to this question is the idea that destiny makes character. As destiny, supposedly in the Greek mindset, maps out all events before they occur, we can today assume with this logic that perhaps the components that "built" Oedipus' character were caused by fate. We know today that character is determined by biological factors and experience. These biological factors would have been determined by how well he was fed, how well he developed, his genes etc. The experience would have also been determined by the pre-destined master plan of fate. Thus, it is possible to argue that Oedipus, as components of his character and mind, was entirely shaped by fate. Therefore, he cannot be held responsible for what he has done, as he has no control

over his actions. However, the grounds that these arguments are based on are essentially unreliable. In my opinion, fate does not exist. Yet, as this is a personal choice similar to religious belief in the sense that there can be no definitive argument for or against, we cannot rationally conclude decisively either way. Yet it would be interesting to note that as this play is constructed along the lines of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. The way in which the play is constructed would try to convey the sentiment that fate was the overriding factor and thus, it could be a valid basis for the argument just outlined. Nevertheless, if we were to look at the play and interpret it according to our own value judgments system, then we could just as easily reject this principle. It all depends on how we would like to approach the play. In addition, as there is no definitive or a positive way of doing this way, it can be said to be neither "right" nor "wrong". The second explanation is the idea that it could be a mixture of both destiny and character. However, this seems a little inconsistent. How can anyone's character have any consequence if destiny is at work? During Oedipus, we see many examples of how this can be resolved. When Oedipus (unbeknown to him) meets his father on the road, he could have decided to walk away and not react. However, he decided to react aggressively, and thus kills his father. However, theoretically, if his character had been different, fate could have returned later and tested him in different ways, perhaps then engaging his good-natured side. When Oedipus meets the sphinx, he could have turned away; instead, his character dictates that he should be bold and face her. Thus, he becomes King, and sets him on his path to incest. However, if he had acted differently, surely fate being fate, it would have found another way to trap him. In this logic, the crucial difference is that fate requires him to play a part to execute the plan. Perhaps of all the possible choices, this is the one

avored most by Aristotle. It conforms completely to his way of looking at things. This solution is the idea that we are all controlled by fate. Everything is controlled by fate. In Oedipus, if we were to accept this way of looking at things, we would conclude that the entire Athenians were one giant chess game. It is as if everything was kick started millions of years ago, with each action already planned out. Then as the gods saw the world developing around them, they decided to punish and reward those who they favored. Conforming to the tragic human situation, a decent character falls through an error of action that has its origins in his character. This is merely Aristotle's theory of tragedy, which is what the play was based on. On lines 20-1 the priest even tells Oedipus that the city is caught in a tide of death from which there is no escaping, which lets us know that this was definitely the view at the time. Essentially, we are dealing with an artificial plot. These series of events do not conform to real world values, only to the main beliefs of Aristotle. Thus, when we look at this plot, the mechanics of it cannot be dealt with in a normal way. This is theatre. It has been crafted to look as though the fall is due to some error of action, strongly entwined with fate. It gives the impression that Oedipus could not have stopped the actual horrific incest with his mother and the murder of his father from occurring. For Sophocles, it seems almost certain that, it was all down to fate.

Today's society it is not likely that many people would believe this unreservedly as people would in the time of Sophocles' Oedipus seems unfortunate, a victim of superstition as much as anything else. Sophocles wrote an excellent tragedy, although Oedipus does not die, he still lives with the guilt that he killed his father, married his own mother, and reproduced children with his mother. I believe Oedipus was a great tragic

hero because he saved the towns life even though he ruined his own. His fate was tested through out the play and he chooses to deny it. Bierce has a unique style to pull the reader into the story. To name a few techniques, his complex illusions keep the audience in suspense, his detailed descriptions allow the reader to picture all aspects of the story and the dividing of the story into three separate parts help them to stay focused. In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”, Farquhar’s fantasy overtakes his reality leaving him with only one option on returning to reality death. Numerous critics argue the relevancy of the plot of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”. The fantasy and reality connection between Farquhar’s imagination and the hanging make the story. Bierce creates suspense and confusion through mind deception. Time manipulation, the fantasy realm, and the overlapping of dreams and reality equally deceive the reader and the protagonist. Yet to those of who accept fate, perhaps this could be the explanation. It is a completely personal decision, based on an individual interpretation. King Oedipus and Farquhar make their own decisions in their own way and lives with the consequences those brought. There is no one correct answer for interpretation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in depends completely on individuals perception of the actuality of fate.

### Work Cited

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