

Revision Guide

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Ambrose Bierce

Scrbblj.

"If I could
free my
hands"



VOCABULARY

Stout: something strong or sturdy

Cross-timber: a beam placed across other structural members to provide support

Slack: looseness or lack of tension

Sentinel: a soldier or guard whose job is to stand and keep watch

Planking: wooden planks collectively, often used for flooring or as a structural component

Embrasure: an opening in a wall or parapet that allows the firing of a cannon

Protruded: stuck out or juttet out from a surface

Muzzle: the open end of a firearm's barrel

Deference: respect or humble submission

Unsteadfast: not firmly fixed or constant; unstable

Sluggish: slow-moving or inactive

Brooding: appearing darkly menacing or ominously thoughtful

Apprehension: anxiety or fear that something bad or unpleasant will happen

Perilous: full of danger or risk

Dictum: a formal statement from an authoritative source

Ludicrous: ridiculous, laughable, absurd

Endeavour: an attempt to achieve a goal

Noose: a loop with a running knot, tightening as the rope or wire is pulled

and typically used to hang people or trap animals

Direst: extremely serious or urgent

Pang: a sudden sharp pain or painful emotion

Ripples: small waves or undulations

Marksmen: people skilled in precision shooting

Ramrods: rods used for ramming down the charge of a muzzleloading firearm

Diminuendo: decreasing in loudness (used as a direction in music)

Smitten: struck with a powerful or disastrous effect

A charge of grape: a type of ammunition for a cannon, consisting of small round shots or balls packed tightly together in a bag or a metal canister, intended to scatter upon leaving the barrel

Commingled: mixed; blended

Gyration: a rapid movement in a circle or spiral

Giddy: feeling dizzy or unsteady

Aeolian harps: musical instruments that are 'played' by the wind

Cannoneer: a soldier who operates a cannon

Turf: grass and the surface layer of the earth held together by its roots

Delirium: an acutely disturbed state of mind characterised by restlessness, illusions, and incoherence

Flutter: to move or fall with a light irregular or trembling motion

TASK

Before studying further, read extensively about the American Civil War. Then, answer the questions below:

1. What was it?
2. Why did it start?
3. How did it end?
4. What was its lasting impact on America?
5. Find definitions for the key terms below:

- Union
- Confederacy
- Secession
- Emancipation Proclamation
- Agitator
- Plantation
- Civilian
- Sympathiser



CHARACTER LIST

Peyton Farquhar: Farquhar, the protagonist, is a wealthy Alabama planter and slave owner in his mid-thirties. He passionately supports the Southern cause (see context below), and his frustrations about not being able to serve in the military led him to take risky actions. He's depicted as having good features and a kindly expression, which juxtapose dramatically with his doomed fate. During the American Civil War, it would have been unusual for a man of his upper-class status to be executed, yet the story begins with him standing on a bridge, surrounded by soldiers, about to be hanged.

Farquhar's Wife: a minor character who is portrayed as a loving and dutiful wife - although she is depicted primarily through Farquhar's memories and thoughts of her. There's a brief moment in the present where she fetches water for him, displaying her hospitality and kindness, though her name and much about her remain unknown. Her image is invoked in Farquhar's mind as he faces imminent death, highlighting her importance in his life. The memory of her and his desire to return to her serve as a driving force for Farquhar's will to survive.

The Federal Scout: Bierce depicts the Federal Scout as a detached and stoic presence. He is seen as a professional soldier, duty-bound to fulfill his role in the war. Disguised as a Confederate soldier, the federal scout visits Farquhar's plantation to gather information. He tricks Farquhar into attempting to sabotage Owl Creek Bridge by telling him about its significance to the Union army, which then leads to Farquhar's execution.

The Executioners: comprising two private soldiers and a sergeant, these Union soldiers carry out Farquhar's execution on the Owl Creek Bridge. They have a minor role in the story but are crucial to its plot.

The Captain: a minor character who oversees Farquhar's execution; he demonstrates strict professionalism and military etiquette.

The Lieutenant: a Confederate officer who is only mentioned briefly while giving commands to the firing squad. His calm and even intonation during the execution juxtaposes with the chaotic situation.

The Sentinels: the two Union soldiers who capture Farquhar at the beginning of the story. Stationed at Owl Creek Bridge, they discover his attempt to sabotage it and capture him. Their responsibility for catching Farquhar leads inexorably to his death sentence.



SETTING

Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' takes place during the **American Civil War (1861-65)**. The story unfolds in Northern Alabama, where Peyton Farquhar, the protagonist, awaits his execution on Owl Creek Bridge itself. The bridge is a **symbol** of transition and uncertainty; it connects Farquhar's home, a safe haven, to his impending doom. The location is particularly notable for its stark **contrasts** - the serene, natural creek below sharply contrasts with the horrifying scene of military execution above. Throughout the **narrative**, Farquhar experiences vivid hallucinations that transport him from the grim reality of the bridge to a fantastical journey through an enchanting forest. This spectral forest, seemingly interminable to Farquhar, represents his desperate struggle for survival and freedom. The story finally culminates at Farquhar's home, an illusory sanctuary that ultimately becomes his final destination in his journey to death.

PLOT SUMMARY

- The story begins with the protagonist, Peyton Farquhar, a Confederate sympathiser, standing on a railroad bridge, bound and ready to be hanged by Union soldiers.
- Farquhar's mind wanders as he awaits his execution, and he vividly imagines escaping and returning to his family.
- There is a **flashback** to a time before his capture. A Federal scout, disguised as a Confederate soldier, tricks Farquhar into attempting to sabotage the Owl Creek Bridge, which leads him to be caught and sentenced to death.
- Back in the present, Farquhar's illusion of escape continues. He is described as breaking free from his bindings, evading a flurry of bullets, and swimming to safety.
- Farquhar travels through the forest back to his home, where he sees his wife waiting for him.
- However, as he is about to embrace his wife, Farquhar feels a sharp blow to the back of his neck. There is a **plot twist**, and the harsh reality sets in: **Farquhar has not escaped; in fact, he is hanging from the bridge, dead.** We learn that his imagined escape was merely a hallucination in the final moments before his execution.

TASK

Why do you think Bierce structures the ending of the story with a **plot twist** this way? What emotional impact does it have on the reader when they discover that Bierce's escape was merely a fantasy and that he has in fact been hanged?



NARRATIVE VOICE

The **impersonal, omniscient third-person viewpoint** allows the reader to dive into the mind of the protagonist, Peyton Farquhar so that we are partially experiencing his thoughts, feelings, and perceptions during his impending execution. This approach creates intimacy and immediacy, making the reader feel as though they experience events alongside Farquhar. However, the narrative also shifts between **objective observation** and **subjective experience**, moving between cold descriptions of the execution setup to Farquhar's deep, **inner consciousness**. This powerful **contrast** highlights Farquhar's desperate mental escape into an imagined reality. As such, the **narrative voice** actively shapes the story's psychological depth and **dramatic irony**, rather than being a passive observer.

QUOTATIONS

"A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below."

This opening sentence of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" immediately sets the scene and announces the **central conflict** of the story: a man's impending execution. This creates a **dramatic tone**, placing the protagonist both literally and figuratively in a moment of suspense. The sentence also introduces the bridge, which serves as a **critical symbol** in the narrative. It represents both a physical and metaphorical threshold between life and death that the main character, Peyton Farquhar, is teetering on.

"The man who was engaged in being hanged was apparently about thirty-five years of age."

This quotation is a matter-of-fact description of Peyton Farquhar's situation, using a detached, almost **clinical tone**. The choice of the word "engaged" typically associated with voluntary activities, **ironically** represents Farquhar's involvement in his own execution. It contrasts with the horrifying reality of what is taking place - a hanging. The phrase "apparently about thirty-five years of age" conveys an impersonal observation, emphasizing the **cold, detached perspective of the narrative voice**. This detachment further reinforces the harsh reality of war where individuality and identity are often stripped away in the face of death. It also subtly hints at the **broader theme of illusion versus reality** that pervades the story - Farquhar appears to be one thing (a man of about thirty-five years), but the reality (a man about to die) is far more **tragic**.

"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."

By describing Peyton Farquhar's 'good' features and well-fitting coat, Bierce creates a **contrast** between the genteel, dignified image of a refined, upper-class civilian and the brutal, undignified reality of his impending execution.

The use of **dashes** in the sentence allows the reader to pause, reflecting on each feature as it unfolds, thus enhancing the **visual imagery**. This choice of **punctuation** also adds a **rhythmic** quality to the sentence, echoing the ticking clock of Farquhar's remaining time.

"Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician, he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause."

Farquhar's political and social position is unmistakably and resolutely defined, vividly illuminating the deep-seated political tensions that prevailed during the era of the Civil War. His unwavering dedication and unwavering commitment to the Southern cause not only underscore his character but also serve as a reminder of the complexities and fervour that defined that tumultuous time in history.

"The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded."

This is a wry and bitter statement, suggesting that the 'liberal' military code, which proclaims fairness and justice, is an **ironic contradiction**. It unveils the capacity to hang 'gentlemen', shining a spotlight on the indiscriminate brutality that war brings forth, sparing no one in its path. This observation serves as a reminder of the complex and **paradoxical nature** of conflicts, where even the most noble ideals can be twisted and shattered in the face of harsh realities.

"The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in turn moved apart one pace."

This sentence sets up a **tense and suspenseful staging**, hinting at the meticulous military precision and the chillingly impersonal nature of the execution procedure. The **atmosphere** is thick with anticipation, as every minute detail is carefully

orchestrated to create a sense of foreboding. The reader is left on the edge of their seat, captivated by the impending events that are about to unfold.

"A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current."

The **alliterative phrase** 'dancing driftwood', a seemingly insignificant detail, in fact **symbolises** Farquhar's impending and inevitable journey towards death. As he helplessly floats along the current of his fate, the gentle swaying of the driftwood mirrors the ebb and flow of his final moments, accentuating the profound and haunting nature of his ultimate destiny.

"The water, touched to gold by the early sun..."

The phrase "touched to gold" implies a transformation, suggesting the power of perspective and the capacity of the human mind to change reality – a recurring **theme** in the story. The early sun symbolises hope and a new beginning, while gold denotes something precious and valuable, perhaps life itself. This also perhaps represents Farquhar's distorted perception of time and his desperate clinging to life.

"If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream."

The **conditional conjunction** "If" at the beginning of the sentence shows Farquhar's desperate hope and desire for freedom. The language is simple and direct, reflecting Farquhar's intense focus on survival. The phrase "throw off the noose" is an act of resistance against his executioners, while "spring into the stream" reflects his hope of escape and his desire to plunge back into the stream of life. This sentence encapsulates the **theme of struggle against inevitable fate**. The use of **quotation marks** for Farquhar's thoughts provides a glimpse into his mental state, illustrating his desperation and will to survive.

"No service was too humble for him to perform in the aid of the South,..."

The protagonist's unwavering commitment to the Southern cause is further emphasised here. His selfless devotion and resolve have become a source of tremendous strength in his darkest hour, as he faces death with courage and conviction.

"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."

This quotation is a vivid depiction of Farquhar's physical sensations as he nears execution. The use of **semicolons** breaks up the sentence into distinct but connected parts, each highlighting a different sensation - the aching neck, the burning brain, and the wildly leaping heart. This **sentence structure** reflects Farquhar's fracturing sense of reality. The **metaphor** of the heart trying to force itself out of his mouth is a powerful **image** of his desperation and fear, yet it also symbolises his defiance and struggle to survive.

"He springs forwards with extended arms."

This brief, energetic sentence marks a pivotal moment in the story. The use of the **present tense** imparts a sense of immediacy and urgency, while the action of springing forward suggests a last-ditch attempt at escape. The 'extended arms' evoke the image of a man reaching out for salvation. On a thematic level, this sentence encapsulates Farquhar's struggle against his fate, his refusal to accept his impending death, and his desperate clutch at the illusion of freedom.

"As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck;"

At this **climactic moment**, just as Farquhar's anticipation of reuniting with his beloved wife reaches its peak, a sudden and devastating 'stunning blow' shatters his reverie. The abruptness of this interruption serves as a reminder of the cruel intrusion of reality, forcefully jolting him back to the harshness of his circumstances.

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

The final declaration of Farquhar's death is as **abrupt** as the hanging itself, leaving the reader with a profound sense of the futility and finality of his situation. The **imagery** of his lifeless body swinging beneath the bridge conveys an eerily poetic notion of the tragedy and beauty found in death.

GENRE

'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' falls under the genres of **realism** and **psychological fiction**, although it also contains **tragic elements**.

As a **work of realism**, the narrative confronts the gruesome aspects of war and death, presenting them in detail and without romanticisation. It depicts Farquhar's hanging clinically and showcases the soldiers' indifferent attitudes. Readers of the story had likely lived through the American Civil War, as it was published five years after its end, so they would have been deeply affected both psychologically and emotionally by the story.

As a **work of experimental psychological fiction**, the narrative delves deep into Farquhar's inner consciousness, exploring his mental processes, perceptions, and illusions as he faces impending death. It uses a **stream-of-consciousness** style at times to reveal his hopeful thoughts of escape, his imagined sensations of freedom, and the cruel shattering of his dreams. Ultimately, the narrative shows how the human mind can create alternative realities as a means of coping with grim and traumatic situations.

CONTEXT

Published in 1890, '**An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge**' became one of Bierce's most known and admired works, celebrated for its unconventional narrative structure and its exploration of the boundary between illusion and reality.

Born in Ohio in 1842, **Ambrose Bierce** served in the Union Army during the American Civil War, an experience that influenced much of his fiction. Bierce's fiction expresses his cynical and satirical worldview, which developed as a result of his direct experiences with death and violence during the war.

The American Civil War serves as the backdrop for 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge', with Peyton Farquhar, a Southern sympathiser, as the protagonist. Lasting from 1861 to 1865, the American Civil War was a conflict fought between the Northern states (known as the Union) and the Southern states that seceded from the Union to form the Confederacy. The Unionists fought to abolish slavery, as they felt that it was morally wrong but also (more significantly) that it would break the booming economy of the South, which was formed on slave labour. The Confederates, on the other hand, fought to preserve society as it was. The Civil War resulted in significant casualties on both sides, and the Unionists won, which led to the abolition of slavery in the United States.





ATTITUDES

Escapism is inherent to the human condition - Peyton Farquhar, longs to escape from his impending execution and struggles to confront the terrifying reality of the situation. His imagination creates an intricate narrative of an impossible escape, showcasing the human propensity for escapism when confronted with harsh realities. The power of the mind to construct such vivid illusions underscores the intense desire for survival and freedom against the odds.

Beyond its sometimes romantic representation, war is brutal and inhumane - The story vividly portrays the violent and ruthless nature of war. The impersonal attitudes of the soldiers, the depersonalisation of Farquhar as he's executed, and the graphic depiction of his death underscore the dehumanising and destructive effects of war. This attitude reflects Bierce's own experiences as a soldier, highlighting the grim reality which is often obscured by romanticised portrayals of war. Particularly in Bierce's time, it was far more common to glorify war as a heroic event than it was to critique its morality or expose its absurdism.

Although imagination offers a brief escape from reality, it cannot defeat death - Despite Farquhar's genuine desires and illusions of escape, the story concludes with his inevitable death. This resonates with the tragic reality of life's impermanence and the inescapable nature of death. Bierce's narrative reminds us of the finality of death and the futility of attempts to evade it.

THEMES

The Power of Perception

The Cruelty of War

The Illusion of Freedom

The Inevitability of Death

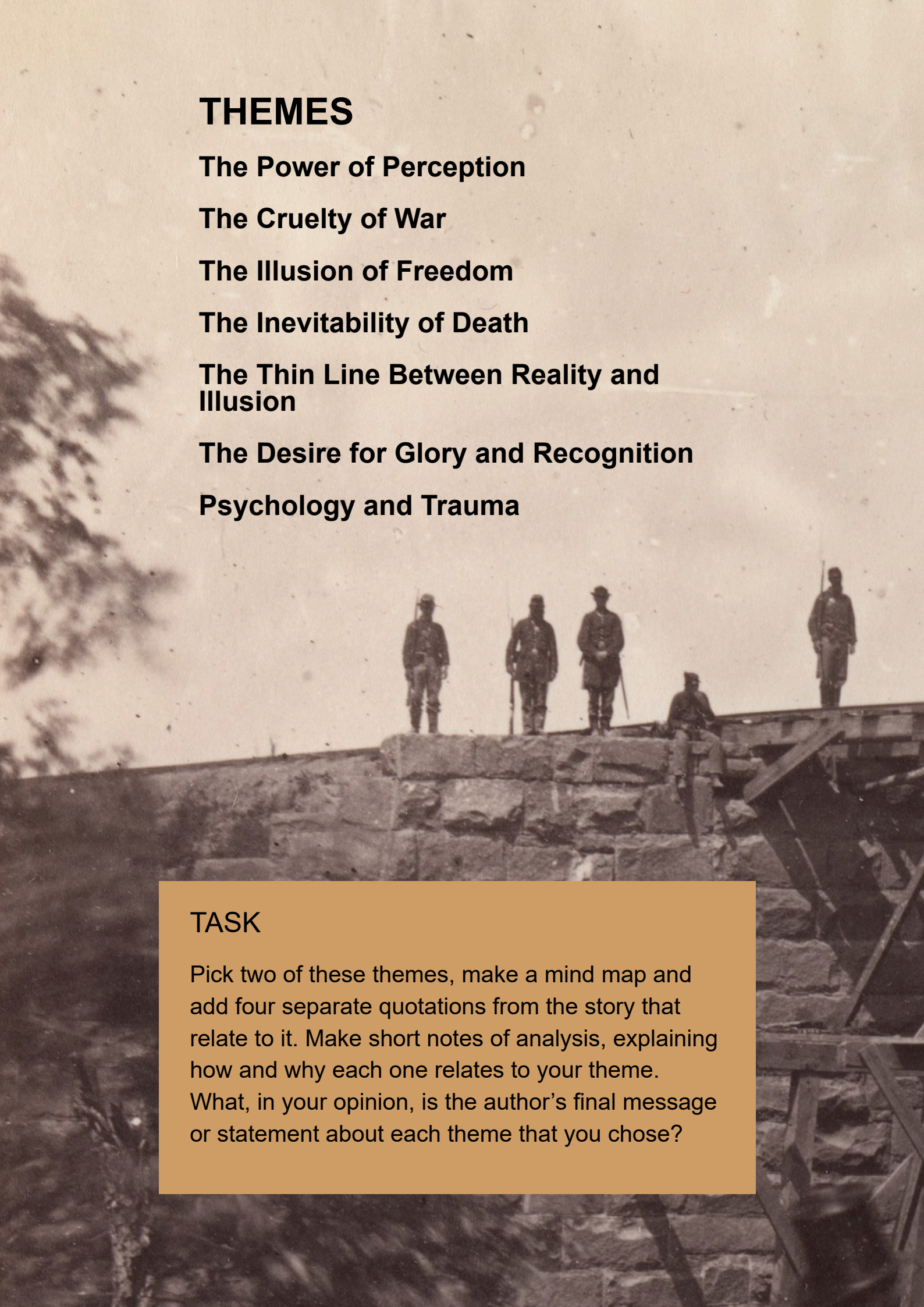
The Thin Line Between Reality and Illusion

The Desire for Glory and Recognition

Psychology and Trauma

TASK

Pick two of these themes, make a mind map and add four separate quotations from the story that relate to it. Make short notes of analysis, explaining how and why each one relates to your theme. What, in your opinion, is the author's final message or statement about each theme that you chose?





ADAPTATIONS

"The Twilight Zone" (1964)

"La Rivière du Hibou" (1962)

**"An Occurrence at Owl Creek
Bridge" (2005)**



EXERCISES

1. Identify the characteristics of Peyton Farquhar, the protagonist of the story. Describe him in your own words. What does his experience tell you about the human condition?
2. Identify instances where the line between illusion and reality blurs in the story, using quotations as references. Discuss how these instances impact your understanding of the narrative and its themes.
3. Imagine you are a character in the story observing Farquhar's execution. Write a diary entry describing the events and your thoughts on them.
4. Find three examples of powerful imagery in the story, explaining briefly for each one how / why it is effective.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. "War is depicted as a ruthless and dehumanising force in the story." How far do you agree with this statement? Provide evidence from the text to substantiate your viewpoint.
2. "Peyton Farquhar's imagined escape is a profound exploration of the human longing for freedom." To what extent do you agree with the statement?
3. Examine the role of the setting of the American Civil War in shaping the events and themes in 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'.
4. "The story challenges the romanticised notion of war and glory." In light of this statement, discuss how Farquhar's motivations and eventual end serve as a critique of the glorification of war.

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