



Overview: This lesson focuses on teaching students to understand how an author’s choices -- where and when to set a story, how to order the events in the plot, how to introduce and develop the characters -- are vital to understanding the author’s purpose. (Lesson Duration: 2 hours)

Standards:

- **RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **RL.11-12.3:** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the actions is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed)

Objectives:

- Students will learn the importance of using evidence to substantiate an opinion or reading of a literary text.
- Students will examine authorial choices for setting, structure, characterization, and point of view in a short story and explore the impact of those choices.

Materials:

Classroom copies of the following texts:

- Ambrose Bierce, "[An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge](#)"

Procedure:

Before the Lesson

Students should have received copies of the story and should have read the work at least one time. Students should be familiar with the concepts of setting, point of view, plot, flashback, tone, mood, structure, theme, and irony.

Activity 1: Exploring the Text

What is Structure?

Structural moves are those large-scale decisions an author makes that determine the course of the narrative as a whole -- those decisions that we could compare to a route on a map. Does the author proceed through a narrative in strict chronological order, for example? Is the ending going to be comic or tragic? What informs the decision to begin the narrative in a particular?



place -- or end it in a particular place? How do these decisions help the author express her or his major message?

Practice: Gathering Data

In small groups or individually, have the students explore the text from the perspective of its “large pieces,” the three distinct parts of Bierce’s narrative, defining the following questions:

- What is the story’s setting?
- How has the author structured chronological order in this story?
- What is the primary event that occurs in part I? Part II? Part III?
- How much time initially seems to be covered by the story, particularly by part III? How much time is *actually* covered by the story?
- How does point of view change in each part of the story?
- How do tone and mood change in each part of the story?

Notice that the questions here are fairly factual -- there really is not much room for argument about the story is setting (northern Alabama during the Civil War), nor about the primary events of the story. That is fine -- the purpose of this part of the activity is to gather facts first before proceeding to the second part of the discussion.

A Brief Note about Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially for more reticent students, the opportunity to “test-drive” their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those “Mount Rushmore moments” in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, “Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we’ll reconvene as a class and see what you think.” This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.



Whole-Class Discussion

The class discussion should share the data gathered about the story, and at that time, the teacher can essentially fact-check, focusing students on substantiating their claims based on the evidence in the story. This part of the lesson should not take particularly long -- its essential purpose is to lay groundwork for the meatier issues raised by Bierce's use of structure and point of view.

Activity Two: Digging Deeper

Small-Group Practice

Asking Harder Questions

At this point, students should take the original questions they were given and turn them into more complex investigations of author purpose and intent. Almost any "fact question" can be turned into a deeper and more meaningful one that explores theme and purpose by the simple addition of the word "why." The first two questions have been done; the students should complete the remainder. Multiple versions of a question are possible.

Example of Question Revisions

~~What is the story's setting?~~

1a. Why set this story during the American Civil War?

~~1. How has the author structured chronological order in this story?~~

2a. Why has Bierce divided time into these parts?

Students should share their answer in small groups, finding textual evidence to support their insights and analyses before sharing their ideas with the class as a whole.

Whole-Class Discussion

At this point, the class can turn to whole-class discussion in earnest, developing reasons for Bierce's choices in structuring and ordering this story as he did.

A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

WHY?

- Why do you think so?
- Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point?
- Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word?

WHERE?

- Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information?
- Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point?

WHAT?

- What do you mean when you say " ____ "?
- What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it?
- What else could the author have said here?
- What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do?

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one "right answer," there are better and worse ones – and the better ones *are* better because they are supported by the words of the author.**



During discussion, students should be directed to look at Bierce's choices individually and in isolation first, exploring the reasons for a specific decision standing alone. For example, many students will realize that the reason for Bierce's shift from a more objective, distant third-person point of view in the first part of the story to a more intimate, focused third-person limited point of view in the third part enables us to see the world through Peyton Farquhar's eyes and to experience the hallucinogenic dilation of time and HDTV-esque quality of his perceptions of the setting around him -- the water, the trees, the sound of his own watch in these last moments of his consciousness. However, they will also usually realize that Bierce would have made a critical error by taking us that one step further, into first-person narration, for readers would never know -- as Peyton never knows -- that his escape has occurred only within the confines of his consciousness.

Putting the Parts Together

At this point, the relationships between Bierce's choices -- and the impact those choices had on his theme -- can be explored in full. These questions can be explored through further discussion or through analytical writing, or both, and truly represent the culmination of the "foundational" work of understanding the parts of a story that took place previously during discussion.

Culminating Discussion: Putting the Pieces Together

1. Generally, readers feel as if they are "drawn in" to Peyton's perception through the use of a tight, third-person limited point of view that allows readers to see Peyton objectively, yet share his perceptions and consciousness. What argument is Bierce making about human consciousness?
2. Given that Bierce delays telling us a crucial feature of the plot -- the fact that the protagonist's escape has occurred only in his own mind in the seconds before his death -- what argument is Bierce making about reality?
3. Given that Bierce could have made Peyton an ordinary criminal hung for a capital offense, what was his symbolic or thematic reason for setting the story during the Civil War and making Peyton a Confederate saboteur? What connections exist between Bierce's ideas about time, reality, and perception and the symbolic possibilities of the Civil War as a metaphor for the human mind?

Assessment

Assessment of this concept could take a variety of forms, including a speech, discussion, or journal entry written in response to the following prompt:

The critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have argued that "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" depends too much on a "quirk of human psychology" and therefore is more of a "case study" than a work of good fiction that reveals something important about human nature, as good fiction should do. Do you agree, disagree, or partly agree with this critical view of the story? Why or why not? What elements of human nature does Bierce reveal (or fail to reveal) in this narrative?