An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Ambrose Bierce, Matthew Brady, and Realism

Matthew Brady civil war photographs

The success of Bierce’s surprise ending in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” depends on the believability of the world he establishes at the beginning of the story. He carefully lays out all of the details: the setting is northern Alabama, and the time is the Civil War. Bierce precisely describes the complicated series of beams, planks, and ropes needed to hang Farquhar. Bierce’s descriptions of the positioning of the soldiers, the way they hold their guns, the minutiae of military ritual and conduct, and the exact terminology and diction all establish a recognizable world. To give his story authenticity and authority, Bierce drew on his experience fighting for the North during the Civil War. Such specific details ground readers in the story, and only at the end does Bierce reveal his structural innovations. In the final section, a fantasy world replaces reality, but this fantasy world is deceptively similar to the real world. Without such elaborate, realistic detail at the beginning of the story, the final revelation would be far less jarring. If we expected that Farquhar was simply imagining his escape—that is, if Bierce had failed to provide enough realistic details to make the fantasy world believable—then the story would lose its shocking effect.

By invoking the gritty details of an enemy’s execution, Bierce participates in a realist tradition that helped to transform popular conceptions of war. He takes his place among other writers, artists, and photographers of the era who did not romanticize or avoid the war’s horrific nature. Instead, they presented shockingly detailed portrayals of violence and death. For example, in the novel The Red Badge of Courage (1895), Stephen Crane, Bierce’s contemporary, brought a startling psychological realism to the story of protagonist Henry Fleming’s wartime experience. Crane attempted to capture the barbaric ways in which an untrained soldier proved his mettle, and in doing so he exposed the unenviable side of military life: wanton killing. Similarly, photographer Matthew Brady’s battlefield photographs <https://www.google.com/search?q=mathew+brady+civil+war&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=RpIUU6_ECMnwkQe76IG4Bw&sqi=2&ved=0CCQQsAQ&biw=1280&bih=655> brought a harrowing realness to the conflict. The images of fly-strewn, bloody corpses stripped the war of its glory and underscored the high cost of victory. The reality these artists brought to the public forced a new realization on many Americans. They saw that lives were often senselessly sacrificed in the name of an abstract cause.

Your assignment:

Write a short story from first or third person omniscient about an incident you either witnessed or experienced: Upload this to google docs. In-class assignment work on Thursday in class.

Using the link for the photography of the Realism of the Civil War, add at least three photos to your story.