

IRONY AND CHARACTER IN BIERCE AND CRANE

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(1) Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane use similar writing styles in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and The Red Badge of Courage, respectively. Through matter-of-fact descriptions of the physical features of characters and settings, both writers reveal the nature of their characters. The actual reality of the scenes the author depicts is indirectly expressed to us through the use of dramatic irony in their descriptions.

(2) The narrator in both works is an omniscient figure. Through his eyes we are able to see the scenes objectively and examine our own perceptions of the events before we are informed of the characters' views of them. In Bierce's short story, the scene at the bridge is described almost like a painting; Peyton Farquhar's character is indirectly described through his physical appearance. From his "dark hair, combed straight back," to his "well-fitting frock coat," and his "unsteadfast footing" on the bridge, the formality of Farquhar's character is revealed to the reader: he is one devoted to his beliefs (p. 2). Crane similarly describes Henry Fleming's character indirectly through episodes early in the novel as he experiences the glory of being in uniform for the first time. He falls into the trap of feeling the glory and honor of existing as a member of an army soon to be engaged in battle. From a distance, the scene is described: the people of the town praise the uniformed men and flatter them "until he believed that he must be a hero" (p. 19). Such descriptions enable the reader to learn about the characters before the characters learn about themselves; and they enable the reader to begin an analysis of each character's thoughts and

personality before he begins to analyze his own thoughts.

(3) The authors use not only the characters' physical descriptions but also their thoughts, which deal frequently with death, to make a statement about the value of life. Through Bierce's omniscient, matter-of-fact descriptions of Peyton's thoughts as he stands waiting to be hanged, we conclude that the parties involved in his hanging are insensitive to his death. Bierce shows us through Peyton's thoughts his intense appreciation of life as he lives his last moments. Farquhar attempts to focus on "the right thoughts," which include his wife and children, but he finds everything--from the swirling current beneath him to the ticking of his watch--distracting. As Farquhar's thoughts progress, he imagines himself escaping, and upon arrival on the beach, he finds beautiful details in every aspect of the sand, trees, leaves, and animals of the woods. His appreciation for life is much keener as he encounters death. We are able to discover that Peyton's escape is merely imaginary--and in this way, Bierce lets us in on the essence of Peyton's character. Similarly, Crane uses Henry's character to show that death's ugliness and inexplicable existence are an inevitable part of life, and one cannot hide from them. We see Henry struggling with the reality of death as he is both attracted to yet repulsed by a corpse in the forest. We observe through his fear and repulsion the value he places on life. He begins to realize that his life at home, however monotonous and difficult it had seemed previously, is much more appealing than the life he is leading now. The distance and omniscience with which the scenes are told make the works similar in style of description.

(4) Through these ironies, Bierce and Crane allow the reader to observe himself in the character before inviting him into the character's mind where he can perceive the

character's conscious beliefs. In Peyton Farquhar's case, there is dramatic irony as he stands waiting to be hanged. He imagines himself fleeing from his fate and gaining back his life after a narrow escape. In reality, he is only making this escape mentally and is actually being hanged. As the scene narratively unfolds, the reader can see Bierce's purpose in revealing Farquhar's inner personality. In Henry's situation, also, Crane's dramatic irony shows the reader that Henry may have forgotten part of the lesson he was supposed to learn. He is growing up and changing rapidly--but he begins to rationalize and make up securities for himself. In the forest he sees a "religious half light" (p. 60): he is rationalizing and convincing himself that there is safety from the war in the forest, that nature will protect him there. Nature, to him, is like a "woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (p. 60). Also in the forest he sees a squirrel that instinctively runs when a rock is thrown at it. Through this observation Henry tries to justify his running from battle by convincing himself that his actions were just as instinctive as the squirrel's (p. 60). The final irony in both works is that the reader has been fooled along with the characters at times: we believe that Peyton Farquhar actually escapes and that Henry actually has found a religious haven in the midst of a raging war.

(5) Dramatic irony is a technique to inform the reader of a thought indirectly within a work of literature about which the character himself does not know. It often provokes a more thoughtful consideration of the themes of a work to have the character and the reader informed at different levels--the reader ultimately understanding more than the character in question. As indirect description is employed by the author, the reader will begin to think more thoroughly about the author's purpose in writing. Bierce and Crane both employ this technique for enhancing their themes of life in the

shadow of death caused by war.