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Violence in Ambrose Bierce's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*

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The literary panorama of the late 19th century and of the 20th century reflects the complexity of the contemporary thoughts, the whirlpool of ideas, offering an overall image of the changes that have occurred in the mind of the individual due to several events: the world or civil wars, the social structures threatened by the expansion of the industrialization, as well as the oscillating economy in America. Thanks to the existence of remarkable writers such as Ambrose Bierce, we can better understand the changes that have occurred in literature and realize at the same time that short-stories such as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" offered new ways of interpreting reality, showing that new issues such as violence, the impact of civil wars on the psyche of the individual as well as the value of life in a cruel universe, have offered a new perspective over the world.

Violence represents that inner force which makes the individual react in a negative way and injure physically or mentally the ones around him. Obviously, the inner anger and grief that make him act in a negative manner have external or internal causes and, consequently, make him be aggressive and tempted to injure or even kill. Ambrose Bierce develops this theme in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", illustrating that war can be a perfect representation of violence not only at the physical level, but also at the psychological one. Thus, Peyton Farquhar, while living the most terrible moments in his life, tries to find a way of escaping the cruel reality and he succeeds in doing it by resorting to his imagination. The anger that he feels when he finds out he is going to be hanged has such a great impact upon his psyche that he hurries to close his eyes and think of the persons he cherries most in his life: his wife and children. The silence that is floating in the air, the river, the forest, the railway, all these elements receive new relevance for the character as he becomes conscious he is at the very end of his life.

The problem of violence connected to war shows in Bierce's book that the exercise of power can sometimes be harmful for the ones that are inferior in terms of hierarchical position. This means that Peyton Farquhar is doomed to accept the will of those greater and more powerful than himself and understand, at the same time, that authority and its exercise is a problem that can change one's life. The character makes several flashbacks in time, constantly oscillating between his desire to escape death and the images of his family. His physical appearance, kind expression, beautiful gray eyes contrast with the desolating atmosphere that reigns over the area. Violence is present not only at the level of the actions taken by the character, but also at the visual level. The scenes described by Bierce abound in images meant to deeply affect the human psyche. Especially in the first part of the book, the character quickly turns from one emotional state to the other: "He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift—all had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance [...] He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. "If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the

invader's farthest advance."¹ The interior monologue used by Bierce illustrates that the character is ready to play his cards and fight to escape death. Clearly, the impersonal, distant style of the author makes the reader concentrate on Farquhar and his state of mind. The character feels powerless in front of the immanence of death and makes processes of conscience.

The short-story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" destroys the heroic and brave image that war implied, and moves it to the dark side, insisting on the devastating and deconstructing effects that war could bring about. Thus, the war appears in the text as the engine of violence, of fear, threatening, exercise of power, pain, destruction or death. The twist in the plot that the end of the short-story offers is even more violent as it succeeds in destroying the positive impression that the reader managed to make after having read the second part of the book. In fact, using a narrative strategy, the reader is forced to return to the cruel reality and find out that there is no escape in front of the powerful ones.

The violent perception that Farquhar builds upon life is centred on a rhetoric of violence, as the character acts exclusively at the psychological level. The shifts in time let the reader understand what really happens, as the violent event of hanging in the middle of a civil war is described through the acts and thoughts of a powerless person. Bierce chooses to represent reality through the eyes of the victim, because he wants to emphasize the pain, pressure and violence that inherently appear in the human mind when finding himself in a situation of crisis. The vocabulary used amplifies this state of complete desolation and suggests that violence is also a matter of gaining or of losing freedom, of survival or of sketching his identity. Taking into consideration that the main part of the story happens in Farquhar's mind, nobody would have expected for a short-story to have such a great impact upon the reader and to represent in such a real way the pain produced by a key-moment in the middle of a war. The story abounds in suspense and mystery, and only the third part brings the so much expected ending. The most violent part of Bierce's book is the image of Farquhar hanging lifelessly, his neck broken, from the bridge. This shocking image has a hidden meaning, suggesting that no one can escape fate and violent death can supervene even to innocent people: "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge".² The abrupt ending destroys any hope of a possible escape of the character and transforms the story of Peyton in a tragic one, transmitting the idea that death is the ultimate solution.

Bierce puts a stress on realism as the story faithfully presents those aspects of war that no one would have dared to write about. Thus, war is no more considered an impersonal event, but a chaotic and devastating one, it is a situation which changes people forever, appealing to aggression, attacks, tensions, execution. The reader becomes aware of the real meaning of the war only after entering Farquhar's mind and living together with him the experience of trying to escape execution through processes of conscience and through memory. However, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is not entirely a violent story as it contains a romantic part in which the character enters another world, diving into the purifying water, which sets him free, clears him and makes him believe he has one more chance to life. After swimming up to exhaustion and even meeting his wife, the character returns to the sordid reality and ends up tragically. In fact, this narrative strategy suggests the absurdity of human condition and directs the story towards violence.

The complexity of the story is assured by the various types of violence it deals with. Firstly, the environment itself sends to a degrading atmosphere, a place in which even nature is doomed to death. Secondly, the character's hallucinatory moments are convulsive because

¹ Bierce, Ambrose, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge",
http://fiction.eserver.org/short/occurrence_at_owl_creek.html

² *Op. cit.*, http://fiction.eserver.org/short/occurrence_at_owl_creek.html

they describe with a realistic nuance the emotional violence experienced by the character, the victim being controlled by the two soldiers who leave the victim recollect for several moments, prolonging in this way the moments of agony and delaying the immanent death. Moreover, physical violence is another form of implementing realism to the text and it is that form of abuse which is best illustrated in the story. The noose put around Peyton's neck and his immediate death are sources of extreme physical violence that aim at provoking pity and inducing pain and terror. This violent death also reveals an ironic attitude regarding the victim, as Bierce makes the reader believe that the character has one more chance to survive and ends his story by showing that, in fact, all his efforts proved to be in vain and his "prize" will be a dreadful death. In front of a harmful death, Farquhar proves to possess some mental characteristics that make him be delirious, revealing at the same time the weakness of his psyche.

All in all, the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" belonging to Ambrose Bierce is a short-story which digs deep in the individual's mind, presenting his way of reacting in front of a desperate situation. It seems that each individual upholds his hope up to the very end of his life dreaming of a sudden event which save him. Bierce's work, which presents new narrative strategies such as the shift in time, the interior monologue, the appeal to the stream of consciousness, to memory, to realism in a certain degree wants to show that it is highly essential to explore the darker sides of life and understand that violent events act mainly at the level of the psyche. Feelings like fear, pain or situations like hanging or aggression are facts that make the individual act unexpectedly, literature being able to do much more than only presenting the adventures of the individual, literature being able, in fact, to fathom the human psyche and find answers to several issues. Bierce's short-story is a disguise of violence which acts basically at the level of the individual consciousness, the writer showing that a utopian solution to death or war is not needed anymore, because people desire to read and live in a realistic way.

Works Cited:

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