

Two Stories as Dream-States

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The short stories, “An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge” by Ambrose Bierce and “The Swimmer” by John Cheever, though greatly separated by time, share many similarities of characterization, symbolism, and narrative techniques. These common elements are especially pronounced when the audience views both stories in the context of their simulation of the human mind in a dream-state. However, the ultimate effect of each story is very different from that of the other. The main reason for this divergence is the differences between the execution of each story’s ending and between each ending’s relation to the rest of the story. Whereas the shocking ending of “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” brings complete resolution and clarity to the story and leaves little room for interpretation, the ending of “The Swimmer” is ambiguous, and the reader must decipher and interpret the odd happenings of the story.

One of the most immediately apparent similarities between the stories is the importance of water and the act of swimming in each, both literally and symbolically. In each story, the immersion of the main character in water can symbolize his entrance into a dream-state. Peyton Farquhar’s illusory escape from execution begins when his noose seems to break and he drops from the bridge into the creek below. According to Loren C. Bell, when Neddy Merrill begins his whimsical journey along the “Lucinda River” formed by the swimming pools of his neighbors and acquaintances, he actually “plunges into the stream of his subconscious” (434). The characters’ physical experiences in the water also carry symbolic weight. The imaginary struggle of Farquhar, a condemned man, to free himself from the noose and reach the surface after seemingly falling into the creek is “revised not only into an escape from death but further, into a vivid dream of

birth itself” (Stoicheff 355). In John Cheever’s story, Neddy’s aquatic adventure represents the dream state itself, as “the dreamer floats on waves of sleep like the swimmer buoyed by light green water” (Bell 434).

An aspect of Neddy and Farquhar’s experiences that is particularly relevant in the context of a dream is the way the characters view their experiences and their relationship to each character’s background. We gather that Neddy Merrill is a well-off suburban socialite who spends much of his time at parties. If his life is “not confining,” it certainly doesn’t seem particularly exciting or romantic, and yet he has “a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure” (Cheever 2250). Thus his “feeling that he was a pilgrim, and explorer, a man with a destiny,” is a kind of wish-fulfillment (Cheever 2251). The act of swimming across pools to get home serves to bring meaning to his life, to “enlarge and celebrate its beauty” (Cheever 2250). Likewise, Peyton Farquhar, a “well-to-do planter,” who, for unexplained reasons, is unable to serve in the Confederate army, desires “the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction” (Bierce 362). When he imagines himself to be making a daring escape from near-death, he applies the “breathless rhetoric of heroism” (Stoicheff 354) to his efforts and sees them as “splendid,” “magnificent,” and “superhuman” (Bierce 363).

Another vivid evocation of a dream-like characteristic from both stories is the main characters’ “sense of separation and detachment” (Bell 434). For Cheever’s Neddy Merrill, this detachment is mostly from the people around him. At first, this manifests as a simple refusal to allow unnecessary social interaction to “delay his voyage” (Cheever 2252). The reader quickly notices that his detachment is much deeper than that. Neddy exists in a different plane of temporal reality than those whom he encounters, and he is

mystified when they refer to events and circumstances in his and their lives that he has no memory of, such as when Mrs. Halloran expresses sympathy for “misfortunes” that Neddy doesn’t know he has (Cheever 2254). In the case of Peyton Farquhar, the sense of detachment extends to his own physical being. He watches, “as an idler might observe the feat of a juggler, without interest in the outcome,” as his body struggles to free itself without his conscious control (Bierce 363).

As in “The Swimmer,” “An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge” progresses with an ever-increasing sense of unreality about the main character’s experience, characterized by Farquhar’s impossibly heightened, “indeed, preternaturally keen and alert” senses (Bierce 363). In both stories, physical phenomena also contribute to the sense of unreality. When Neddy begins his journey, it is a “midsummer” afternoon (Cheever 2250). He makes his way through the chain of swimming pools, and it grows ever colder. He begins to notice signs of autumn, until at last he looks at the stars and wonders what has “become of the constellations of midsummer” (Cheever 2257). Similarly, near the end of his trek home, Peyton Farquhar looks up to see “great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations” (Bierce 366).

Despite these similarities, there is a fundamental difference that sets these stories apart. At the end of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” Bierce reveals that Peyton’s Farquhar’s escape is only an illusion that occurs between the removal of the support and his death. Though this ending surprises the audience, “it seems somehow presaged by the very description” that makes Farquhar’s escape so vivid (Stoicheff 349). At the end of the story, the reader may retrace his steps and see that every seemingly impossible descriptive detail, such as Farquhar’s ability to see the grey color of a far-away

sharpshooter's eye, can be explained by the realization that it was all a delusion created by the desire to survive. There is no need for any other explanation. In contrast, when Neddy Merrill finally arrives, "miserable, cold, tired, and bewildered," at his home and finds it "empty," there is no absolute resolution (Cheever 2257). Cheever does not tell the audience that Neddy wakes up back at the Westerhazys' house. While Loren Bell makes an interesting case for viewing Neddy's journey as a dream by interpreting his "breathing deeply, stertorously" by the pool as a sign of falling asleep, this is not the only possible interpretation (Cheever 2250) (Bell 433). One could choose to see Neddy as someone whose real misfortunes lead to a state of insanity in which he can no longer distinguish past from present. Cheever also provides many indications that Neddy, always needing a drink, could be or could become an alcoholic and that his journey may be an illustration of the descent into alcoholism. Unlike Bierce's story, the audience cannot be certain that Neddy Merrill's experiences are totally illusory. One does not know for sure whether Neddy's loss of everything he holds dear is merely a dream, an opportunity to realize the emptiness of his life and mend his ways, or the actual result of his heavy drinking, infidelity, and financial irresponsibility. Perhaps if Cheever states that it is a dream, the story's impact would be lessened. On the other hand, the possibility that it is just a dream leaves room for the hope that Neddy will learn not to take his happiness for granted.

Both "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "The Swimmer" are representations of dreams. Both of them end in a surprising manner. However, in the end, "The Swimmer" is the much more thought-provoking story of the two because of Cheever's ambiguity toward the fate of his main character. While the audience may

sympathize with Peyton Farquhar, they will not ponder his death for long, because the end of his story reveals that there was never any chance of his survival. With Neddy Merrill, readers are left to wonder how exactly he comes to his destination, or perhaps how he might avoid ending up there.

Works Cited

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