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The Narration in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

Types of Point of View [<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/literature/read/pov2.html>], a lesson on the EDSITEment resource **Learner.org** [<http://www.learner.org/>], lists five types of narrators:

- Objective** . . . tells what happens without stating more than can be inferred from the story's action and dialogue. The narrator never discloses anything about what the characters think or feel, remaining a detached observer.
- Third Person** Here the narrator . . . lets us know exactly how the characters feel.
- First Person** In the first person point of view, the narrator does participate in the action of the story.
- Omniscient** A narrator who knows everything about all the characters is all knowing, or omniscient.
- Limited Omniscient** A narrator whose knowledge is limited to one character, either major or minor, has a limited omniscient point of view.

Ambrose Bierce manipulates the text – by subtly shifting the narrative stance from one type to another – to allow the twist ending of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" to succeed. In the chart below, note what type of narration is represented by each excerpt. One or more types of narration may never be used in this story. Some will reappear. When you are done, locate each excerpt in the text; notice when and how the point of view shifts. How does the narration help make the twist ending work?

NOTE: Lines in parentheses are given to provide context or to facilitate locating a passage, but are not part of the text to be considered in the exercise.

Type of Narration:	Text:
	A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord.
	The arrangement commended itself to his judgment as simple and effective.
	The sergeant stepped aside . . . Peyton Fahrquhar was a well to do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family.
	("Suppose a man – a civilian and student of hanging – should elude the picket post and perhaps get the better of the sentinel," said Fahrquhar, smiling, "what could he accomplish?")
	The soldier reflected.
	(An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come.)
	He was a Federal scout.
	From this state he was awakened – ages later, it seemed to him – by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation.
	Peyton Fahrquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

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Two First-Person Narrators

First-person narrators are notoriously unreliable. Think about the narrators in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “My Favorite Murder” as you respond to the questions below. When possible, provide evidence from the story in the form of a direct quote to support your responses.

	“The Tell-Tale Heart”	“My Favorite Murder”
For what reason do you believe the narrator is telling the story?		
Give an example where the narrator is unreliable.		
Give an example where the narrator is reliable.		
Provide evidence a lawyer might use to prove the narrator is mad.		
Provide evidence the narrator might use in an effort to prove he’s sane.		

Both Poe and Bierce wrote with the intention of producing an intense effect in the reader. Characterize the effect you believe the author intended for each story. What in the story supports your idea?

“The Tell-Tale Heart”:
“My Favorite Murder”: