



**Humanities
& Languages**

Scarborough Sixth Form College

A Level English Literature
Summer Bridging Work

Bridging Unit for English Literature

1. Theatrical Comedy – A Useful Overview

Dr Sean McEvoy's essay about the development of English theatrical comedy will give you a sense of how the genre has developed over time. Highlight the key ideas from each of the following paragraphs:

Ancient Roots – Old Comedy

The dramatic formats established by the Greeks endured a very long time afterwards. In classical Athens, comedy was set apart from tragedy. The earliest theatre took place in competitive festivals, where comedy was performed on a separate day from the tragedies. Athenian 'Old Comedy' went all out for laughs, even though the writers often had important political statements to make. We now only have plays by one comic dramatist, Aristophanes (c.445-c.385 BC). His works are raucous and zany. Satire – the mocking of figures in the public eye, whether politicians, philosophers or playwrights – is its constant mode. Bawdy (sexual) and scatological (toilet) humour were to the fore, and were not necessarily regarded as simply means of entertaining the 'lower orders'. These comedies had plots of a kind, but their storylines tended to be mere frameworks on which to hang a series of set-piece sketches and slapstick routines not necessarily connected to the forward movement of the narrative.

New Comedy

An important change occurred when, towards the end of his career, the tragedian Euripides started writing what later became known as 'romances'. These were plays such as *Helen* (412 BC) which followed the formal structure of tragedies, but featured happy endings where long-lost family members were reunited. This template was later developed by the Greek comic dramatist Menander (342-c.292 BC) into what was known as 'New Comedy'. Plot was now central. The plays usually concerned love-entanglements in the lives of young well-to-do Athenians. Characters tended to fit into recognisable types: the love-struck young man, the cunning but cowardly slave, the angry father, the bragging soldier, the kind-hearted prostitute. The pace was fast, the dialogue was witty and the happy ending often required some implausible turn-up, such as the discovery of a long-lost child. Sex and political satire were no longer important to the genre. When the Romans began to write their own comedies a hundred years later, they took Menander's model of comedy and developed it for themselves. The Roman plays of Plautus (c.250-184 BC) and Terence (193-159 BC) survived into the modern world to become an important part of the grammar school curriculum in Tudor England.

Shakespeare Et Cetera

So, when the first English commercial dramatists began to write comedies for the public playhouses from the 1580s onwards they already had a genre to imitate. Shakespeare's comedies are much more sophisticated than those of Menander and Plautus, but in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night* – and even in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* – plot, character and wit still drive the action. Young love overcomes difficulties and multiple marriage brings about a resolution, whether satisfying or not. But 'comedy' here doesn't necessarily mean that these plays are primarily funny: a substantial part of *The Merchant of Venice* is concerned with anti-Semitism and vengeance, and most of *Measure for Measure* deals with the corrupt

ruler Angelo's attempts to bed the super-chaste Isabella in exchange for her condemned brother's life. 'Comedy' refers to the formal conventions followed by the play, rather than to how funny the drama might be. Shakespeare's funniest creation for many people is Sir John Falstaff in the two *Henry IV* history plays (and not in the 'comedy' *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). The tragedy *Hamlet* has many more laughs than *All's Well That Ends Well*. Shakespeare's funniest comedy is perhaps the one which copies the Roman plays most closely: *The Comedy of Errors*.

But Shakespeare's comedies weren't just taken from classical models. The pre-commercial, community-based English theatre of the Middle Ages and early Tudor period frequently mixed slapstick and even bawdy humour with the treatment of serious religious matters. But unlike in Aristophanes' theatre this kind of fun now began to be associated with the tastes of those of lower social status. A popular tradition of comedy developed in theatres such as The Red Bull, based more on spectacle, action and physical humour. At the same time Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson had read Aristophanes, and his great comedies such as *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1611) reinstate political and contemporary satire, bawdiness, and grotesque characterisation alongside the most dazzling of plots and audience-teasing ruses. Jonson's language can shift from obscenity to lyrical beauty in a trice. His dialogue sounds out the speech of real Londoners but with a constant poetic eloquence.

Jonson influenced the founding of what was known as 'city comedy' in the first two decades of the seventeenth century. In plays such as Middleton's *Michaelmas Term* (1606) or *Eastward Ho* (1605) – in which Jonson had a hand – the values of honest London shopkeepers triumph over the misplaced cunning of feckless but greedy aristocratic layabouts. Thwarted love remained the main plot strand, and marriage still constituted the happy ending.

Restoration Rudeness and the Revenge of the Respectable

Puritan dominance in London ensured the closure of the theatres during the Civil War and Protectorate (1642-1660), but when King Charles II returned from exile in France in 1660, city comedy was revived with a new twist. In Restoration Comedy the bawdy and licentious aristocratic layabouts get all the best lines and the honest people whom they dupe and attempt to seduce don't come off so well. Double entendre and farcical intrigue are the staple of plays such as Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675). In Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676) satire is added to the mix: the main character is a parody of the court rake and playwright the Earl of Rochester. In fact the theatre was very close to the court and its libertine lifestyle, and consequently an important change came into the theatre at this time, copied from France. Tragedy lost its comic element. 'Decorum' or sober good taste was the new watchword; comedy became very much a separate genre. When respectable and godly middle-class opinion reacted to the bawdy excess of Restoration Comedy, what followed in the years ahead tended to be insipid and sentimental comedies of manners. The very best exceptions, such as Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) combined brilliance of plotting with superb comic characterisation. But at this point comedy in the mainstream theatre had come to mean a sentimental tale of thwarted love featuring a broadly predictable gallery of stock characters.

Zany and satirical comedy continued in the rumbustious working-class theatres of the nineteenth-century cities, where parodies of Shakespeare and of 'legitimate' drama were also popular. Farce and sketch-based comedy continued in the 'afterpieces' shown at the end of the evening in the big London playhouses. Admission was half-price during the second half of the evening and the cheap benches filled up to watch these surviving popular forms of theatre after the tragedians had finished their work.

Comedy gets Serious

As happened with many art forms, the turn of the twentieth century brought great change to the theatre. Oscar Wilde's comedies, and in particular his enormously successful *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), exploded for ever the comedy of respectable but thwarted love in its brilliantly self-conscious send-up of the conventions of the whole genre as it had existed. It was not so much that Wilde expressed a political critique of the middle-class values dominant in comedy, but rather that he made it impossible to take the form seriously ever again, though the genre staggered on in light-hearted pieces such as Brighouse's *Hobson's Choice* (1916) for many years. A new 'realistic' form of theatre arose dedicated to political critique, influenced in particular by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. Prominent here was George Bernard Shaw. Shaw reinstated comedy in the heart of the 'serious' play. His *Pygmalion* (1912), for example, succeeded in being hilarious at the same time as making powerful insights into class, language and power in Edwardian England. 'French' Farce – a comedy of misunderstanding, evasions and embarrassment which accelerates towards finely-tuned chaos and a climactic denouement – was also a successful import at this time, especially in the work of Ben Travers in the 1920s and 30s.

Post-War Comedy

In the years after World War Two the English theatre underwent a great revival and comedy flourished in many forms, no longer as a genre with limited conventions. The rebirth of the English stage was often driven by working-class and left-wing writers, and satire was prominent. Joe Orton adapted the farce format in a series of highly irreverent comedies attacking middle-class hypocrisy, sexual and otherwise. *Loot* (1965) and *What the Butler Saw* (1969) stand out here. Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977) combines an excoriating attack on suburban materialism with a sense of real pathos for the lives of those condemned to live in such a world. In a gentler vein, the domestic comedies of Alan Ayckbourn, such as *Absurd Person Singular* (1972), often have a farce-like structure which expresses a sadness and hollowness at the heart of 'respectable' British society. Farce has remained a highly popular format to the present day, whether it deals with a playful satire of the theatre itself as in Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (1982), with Irish Republican terrorism as in Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), or in a traditional reworking of an old Italian comedy such as Richard Bean's *One Man, Two Guvnors* (2011). Standing apart from such social critique were the post-modern comedies of Tom Stoppard, whose laughter arises from a self-consciously clever playfulness, whether with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1969), or with a bizarre conjunction of philosophical scepticism and moon landings in *Jumpers* (1972).

Political Comedy

Many of these new writers brought back into the mainstream theatre the popular comedy traditions which had been banished to music hall, 'variety' and working men's clubs in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* (1975) puts working-class stand-up comedy on stage in an examination of the nature of comedy itself, in a play whose political critique powerfully anticipates the changes to British society after the breakdown of the social-democratic consensus in the late 1970s. Theatrical comedy became a powerful voice of opposition to a series of right-wing governments after 1979. In the 1980s David Hare's *Pravda* (1985) attacked the principles of the Murdoch news empire in a manner which can now be seen as extraordinarily prescient, while Caryl Churchill's uncannily prophetic *Serious Money* (1987) drew on Restoration Comedy and contemporary music to produce a brilliant satire on the newly deregulated money-men and women of the City of London.

Contemporary Comedy

Contemporary comedy is typically structured around a series of bravura set-piece scenes which echo the sketch-format of popular theatre and much TV comedy, yet preserve the rhythms and structures of the 'well-made plays' of the twentieth century: exposition, complication, cliff-hanger, resolution. There is often, however, a tragic edge. Two of the best and most popular plays of this century so far, Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004) and Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), exemplify these qualities. Both are also moving and intelligent reflections on their societies. Bennett's play is an examination of the value of education, literature and love in a market-driven managerialist England, while Butterworth also writes elegiacally, if rumbustiously, about a semi-legendary, wild and outrageous rural England which is passing away before we have understood its worth.

English comedy today turns out to be more like Aristophanes than Shakespeare: not so much a recognisable genre, but rather an uncovering of the fear, anarchy and joy just beneath the surface of a fragile society. Yet there are signs that a possible happy ending may still be found

Source: Dr Sean McEvoy, [Dramatic Genres: Studying Comedy](#), English and Media Centre, 2012

2. Poetry Analysis

Now that you have an overview of dramatic texts, let's have a look at some poetry. This unit is to help you get to grips with analysing author's methods. Read through the poem by Carol Ann Duffy below. If you need to, look up the story of King Midas to get some relevant context for the poem.

Mrs Midas

It was late September, I'd just poured a glass of wine, begun
to unwind, while the vegetables cooked. The kitchen
filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath
gently blanching the windows. So I opened one,
then with my fingers wiped the other's glass like a brow.
He was standing under the pear-tree snapping a twig.

Now the garden was long and visibility poor, the way
the dark of the ground seems to drink the light of the sky,
but that twig in his hand was gold. And then he plucked
a pear from a branch, we grew Fondante d'Automne,
and it sat in his palm like a light-bulb. On.
I thought to myself, is he putting fairy lights in the tree?

He came into the house. The door knobs gleamed.
He drew the blinds. You know the mind; I thought of
the Field of the Cloth of Gold and of Miss Macready.
He sat in that chair like a king on a burnished throne.
The look on his face was strange, wild, vain; I said,
What in the name of God is going on? He started to laugh.

I served up the meal. For starters, corn on the cob.
Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.
He toyed with his spoon, then mine, then with the knives, the forks.

He asked where was the wine. I poured with a shaking hand,
A fragrant bone-dry white from Italy, then watched
As he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.

It was then that I started to scream. He sank to his knees.
After we'd both calmed down, I finished the wine
On my own, hearing him out. I made him sit
On the other side of the room and keep his hands to himself.
I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.
The toilet I didn't mind. I couldn't believe my ears;

How he'd had a wish. Look, we all have wishes; granted.
But who has wishes granted? Him. Do you know about gold?
It feeds no one; aurum, soft, untarnishable; slakes
No thirst. He tried to light a cigarette; I gazed, entranced,
As the blue flame played on its luteous stem. At least,
I said, you'll be able to give up smoking for good.

Separate beds. In fact I put a chair against my door
near petrified. He was below, turning the spare room
into the tomb of Tutankhamun. You see, we were passionate then,
in those halcyon days; unwrapping each other, rapidly,
like presents, fast food. But now I feared his honeyed embrace,
the kiss that would turn my lips to a work of art.

And who, when it comes to the crunch, can live
with a heart of gold? That night, I dreamt I bore
his child, its perfect ore limbs, its little tongue
like a precious latch, its amber eyes
holding their pupils like flies. My dream-milk
burned in my breasts. I woke to streaming sun.

So he had to move out. We'd a caravan
in the wilds, in a glade of its own. I drove him up
under cover of dark. He sat in the back.
And then I came home, the woman who married the fool
who wished for gold. At first I visited, odd times,
parking the car a good way off, then walking.

You knew you were getting close. Golden trout
on the grass. One day, a hare hung from a larch,
a beautiful lemon mistake. And then his footprints,
glistening next to the rivers path. He was thin,
delirious; hearing, he said, the music of Pan
from the woods. Listen. That was the last straw.

What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed
but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness. I sold
the contents of the house and came down here.
I think of him in certain lights, dawn, late afternoon,
and once a bowl of apples stopped me dead. I miss most,
even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch.

Now answer the following questions in as much detail as you can:

1. What sort of atmosphere is created in the first verse and how?
2. What effect does the poet's personification of the kitchen have?
3. What is the effect of the structure of the first verse?
4. Explain the appropriateness of the simile in the second verse.
5. What is the effect of the one word sentence "On." In the second verse?
6. What are the "teeth of the rich"?
7. Why is she concerned about the cat and the phone, but not the toilet?
8. Comment on any humour, puns or plays on words that you can find in the poem.
9. Analyse the effect of four other images in the poem.
10. How do you respond to the last verse?
11. What do you think the poem might be called?

Below is some evidence you want to use from the poem (the sandwich filling) to make some points about form, structure and language. There are 5 pieces of evidence. Your task is to construct 5 points around the evidence by writing the introductory point and then afterwards, analysing the evidence more closely. This activity should produce a range of points from each student since not all ideas about why the evidence is there will be the same: we all have our own interpretations remember:

1. The kitchen
filled with the smell of itself, relaxed, its steamy breath
gently blanching the windows.
2. '...it sat in his palm like a light-bulb. On.'
3. 'Within seconds he was spitting out the teeth of the rich.'
4. '...he picked up the glass, goblet, golden chalice, drank.'
5. I locked the cat in the cellar. I moved the phone.
The toilet I didn't mind.

2. Narratology in prose fiction: short stories

Now read the short story, and complete the questions that follow it.

Ambrose Bierce – ‘One of the Missing’ (1888)

Jerome Searing, a private soldier of General Sherman's army, then confronting the enemy at and about Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia, turned his back upon a small group of officers with whom he had been talking in low tones, stepped across a light line of earthworks, and disappeared in a forest. None of the men in line behind the work had said a word to him, nor had he so much as nodded to them in passing, but all who saw understood that this brave man had been intrusted with some perilous duty. Jerome Searing, though a private, did not serve in the ranks; he was detailed for service at division headquarters, being borne upon the rolls as an orderly. "Orderly" is a word covering a multitude of duties. An orderly may be a messenger, a clerk, an officer's servant--anything. He may perform services for which no provision is made in orders and army regulations. Their nature may depend upon his aptitude, upon favor, upon accident. Private Searing, an incomparable marksman, young, hardy, intelligent and insensible to fear, was a scout. The general commanding his division was not content to obey orders blindly without knowing what was in his front, even when his command was not on detached service, but formed a fraction of the line of the army; nor was he satisfied to receive his knowledge of his vis-a-vis through the customary channels; he wanted to know more than he was apprised of by the corps commander and the collisions of pickets and skirmishers. Hence Jerome Searing, with his extraordinary daring, his woodcraft, his sharp eyes, and truthful tongue. On this occasion his instructions were simple: to get as near the enemy's lines as possible and learn all that he could.

In a few moments he had arrived at the picketline, the men on duty there lying in groups of two and four behind little banks of earth scooped out of the slight depression in which they lay, their rifles protruding from the green boughs with which they had masked their small defenses. The forest extended without a break toward the front, so solemn and silent that only by an effort of the imagination could it be conceived as populous with armed men, alert and vigilant--a forest formidable with possibilities of battle. Pausing a moment in one of these rifle-pits to apprise the men of his intention Searing crept stealthily forward on his hands and knees and was soon lost to view in a dense thicket of underbrush.

"That is the last of him," said one of the men; "I wish I had his rifle; those fellows will hurt some of us with it."

Searing crept on, taking advantage of every accident of ground and growth to give himself better cover. His eyes penetrated everywhere, his ears took note of every sound. He stilled his breathing, and at the cracking of a twig beneath his knee stopped his progress and hugged the earth. It was slow work, but not tedious; the danger made it exciting, but by no physical signs was the excitement manifest. His pulse was as regular, his nerves were as steady as if he were trying to trap a sparrow.

"It seems a long time," he thought, "but I cannot have come very far; I am still alive."

He smiled at his own method of estimating distance, and crept forward. A moment later he suddenly flattened himself upon the earth and lay motionless, minute after minute. Through a narrow opening

in the bushes he had caught sight of a small mound of yellow clay--one of the enemy's rifle-pits. After some little time he cautiously raised his head, inch by inch, then his body upon his hands, spread out on each side of him, all the while intently regarding the hillock of clay. In another moment he was upon his feet, rifle in hand, striding rapidly forward with little attempt at concealment. He had rightly interpreted the signs, whatever they were; the enemy was gone.

To assure himself beyond a doubt before going back to report upon so important a matter, Searing pushed forward across the line of abandoned pits, running from cover to cover in the more open forest, his eyes vigilant to discover possible stragglers. He came to the edge of a plantation--one of those forlorn, deserted homesteads of the last years of the war, upgrown with brambles, ugly with broken fences and desolate with vacant buildings having blank apertures in place of doors and windows. After a keen reconnaissance from the safe seclusion of a clump of young pines Searing ran lightly across a field and through an orchard to a small structure which stood apart from the other farm buildings, on a slight elevation. This he thought would enable him to overlook a large scope of country in the direction that he supposed the enemy to have taken in withdrawing. This building, which had originally consisted of a single room elevated upon four posts about ten feet high, was now little more than a roof; the floor had fallen away, the joists and planks loosely piled on the ground below or resting on end at various angles, not wholly torn from their fastening above. The supporting posts were themselves no longer vertical. It looked as if the whole edifice would go down at the touch of a finger.

Concealing himself in the débris of joists and flooring Searing looked across the open ground between his point of view and a spur of Kennesaw Mountain, a half-mile away. A road leading up and across this spur was crowded with troops--the rear-guard of the retiring enemy, their gun-barrels gleaming in the morning sunlight.

Searing had now learned all that he could hope to know. It was his duty to return to his own command with all possible speed and report his discovery. But the gray column of Confederates toiling up the mountain road was singularly tempting. His rifle--an ordinary "Springfield," but fitted with a globe sight and hair-trigger--would easily send its ounce and a quarter of lead hissing into their midst. That would probably not affect the duration and result of the war, but it is the business of a soldier to kill. It is also his habit if he is a good soldier. Searing cocked his rifle and "set" the trigger.

But it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him. For countless ages events had been so matching themselves together in that wondrous mosaic to some parts of which, dimly discernible, we give the name of history, that the acts which he had in will would have marred the harmony of the pattern. Some twenty-five years previously the Power charged with the execution of the work according to the design had provided against that mischance by causing the birth of a certain male child in a little village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, had carefully reared it, supervised its education, directed its desires into a military channel, and in due time made it an officer of artillery. By the concurrence of an infinite number of favoring influences and their preponderance over an infinite number of opposing ones, this officer of artillery had been made to commit a breach of discipline and flee from his native country to avoid punishment. He had been directed to New Orleans (instead of New York), where a recruiting officer awaited him on the wharf. He was enlisted and promoted, and things were so ordered that he now commanded a Confederate battery some two miles along the line from where Jerome Searing, the Federal scout, stood cocking his rifle. Nothing

had been neglected--at every step in the progress of both these men's lives, and in the lives of their contemporaries of their ancestors, the right thing had been done to bring about the desired result. Had anything in all this vast concatenation been overlooked Private Searing might have fired on the retreating Confederates that morning, and would perhaps have missed. As it fell out, a Confederate captain of artillery, having nothing better to do while awaiting his turn to pull out and be off, amused himself by sighting a field-piece obliquely to his right at what he mistook for some Federal officers on the crest of a hill, and discharged it. The shot flew high of its mark.

As Jerome Searing drew back the hammer of his rifle and with his eyes upon the distant Confederates considered where he could plant his shot with the best hope of making a widow or an orphan or a childless mother,--perhaps all three, for Private Searing, although he had repeatedly refused promotion, was not without a certain kind of ambition,--he heard a rushing sound in the air, like that made by the wings of a great bird swooping down upon its prey. More quickly than he could apprehend the gradation, it increased to a hoarse and horrible roar, as the missile that made it sprang at him out of the sky, striking with a deafening impact one of the posts supporting the confusion of timbers above him, smashing it into matchwood, and bringing down the crazy edifice with a loud clatter, in clouds of blinding dust!

When Jerome Searing recovered consciousness he did not at once understand what had occurred. It was, indeed, some time before he opened his eyes. For a while he believed that he had died and been buried, and he tried to recall some portions of the burial service. He thought that his wife was kneeling upon his grave, adding her weight to that of the earth upon his breast. The two of them, widow and earth, had crushed his coffin. Unless the children should persuade her to go home he would not much longer be able to breathe. He felt a sense of wrong. "I cannot speak to her," he thought; "the dead have no voice; and if I open my eyes I shall get them full of earth."

He opened his eyes. A great expanse of blue sky, rising from a fringe of the tops of trees. In the foreground, shutting out some of the trees, a high, dun mound, angular in outline and crossed by an intricate, patternless system of straight lines; the whole an immeasurable distance away--a distance so inconceivably great that it fatigued him, and he closed his eyes. The moment that he did so he was conscious of an insufferable light. A sound was in his ears like the low, rhythmic thunder of a distant sea breaking in successive waves upon the beach, and out of this noise, seeming a part of it, or possibly coming from beyond it, and intermingled with its ceaseless undertone, came the articulate words: "Jerome Searing, you are caught like a rat in a trap--in a trap, trap, trap."

Suddenly there fell a great silence, a black darkness, an infinite tranquillity, and Jerome Searing, perfectly conscious of his rathood, and well assured of the trap that he was in, remembering all and nowise alarmed, again opened his eyes to reconnoitre, to note the strength of his enemy, to plan his defense.

He was caught in a reclining posture, his back firmly supported by a solid beam. Another lay across his breast, but he had been able to shrink a little away from it so that it no longer oppressed him, though it was immovable. A brace joining it at an angle had wedged him against a pile of boards on his left, fastening the arm on that side. His legs, slightly parted and straight along the ground, were covered upward to the knees with a mass of débris which towered above his narrow horizon. His head was as rigidly fixed as in a vise; he could move his eyes, his chin--no more. Only his right arm was

partly free. "You must help us out of this," he said to it. But he could not get it from under the heavy timber athwart his chest, nor move it outward more than six inches at the elbow.

Searing was not seriously injured, nor did he suffer pain. A smart rap on the head from a flying fragment of the splintered post, incurred simultaneously with the frightfully sudden shock to the nervous system, had momentarily dazed him. His term of unconsciousness, including the period of recovery, during which he had had the strange fancies, had probably not exceeded a few seconds, for the dust of the wreck had not wholly cleared away as he began an intelligent survey of the situation.

With his partly free right hand he now tried to get hold of the beam that lay across, but not quite against, his breast. In no way could he do so. He was unable to depress the shoulder so as to push the elbow beyond that edge of the timber which was nearest his knees; failing in that, he could not raise the forearm and hand to grasp the beam. The brace that made an angle with it downward and backward prevented him from doing anything in that direction, and between it and his body the space was not half so wide as the length of his forearm. Obviously he could not get his hand under the beam nor over it; the hand could not, in fact, touch it at all. Having demonstrated his inability, he desisted, and began to think whether he could reach any of the débris piled upon his legs.

In surveying the mass with a view to determining that point, his attention was arrested by what seemed to be a ring of shining metal immediately in front of his eyes. It appeared to him at first to surround some perfectly black substance, and it was somewhat more than a half-inch in diameter. It suddenly occurred to his mind that the blackness was simply shadow and that the ring was in fact the muzzle of his rifle protruding from the pile of débris. He was not long in satisfying himself that this was so--if it was a satisfaction. By closing either eye he could look a little way along the barrel--to the point where it was hidden by the rubbish that held it. He could see the one side, with the corresponding eye, at apparently the same angle as the other side with the other eye. Looking with the right eye, the weapon seemed to be directed at a point to the left of his head, and vice versa. He was unable to see the upper surface of the barrel, but could see the under surface of the stock at a slight angle. The piece was, in fact, aimed at the exact centre of his forehead.

In the perception of this circumstance, in the recollection that just previously to the mischance of which this uncomfortable situation was the result he had cocked the rifle and set the trigger so that a touch would discharge it, Private Searing was affected with a feeling of uneasiness. But that was as far as possible from fear; he was a brave man, somewhat familiar with the aspect of rifles from that point of view, and of cannon too. And now he recalled, with something like amusement, an incident of his experience at the storming of Missionary Ridge, where, walking up to one of the enemy's embrasures from which he had seen a heavy gun throw charge after charge of grape among the assailants he had thought for a moment that the piece had been withdrawn; he could see nothing in the opening but a brazen circle. What that was he had understood just in time to step aside as it pitched another peck of iron down that swarming slope. To face firearms is one of the commonest incidents in a soldier's life--firearms, too, with malevolent eyes blazing behind them. That is what a soldier is for. Still, Private Searing did not altogether relish the situation, and turned away his eyes.

After groping, aimless, with his right hand for a time he made an ineffectual attempt to release his left. Then he tried to disengage his head, the fixity of which was the more annoying from his ignorance of what held it. Next he tried to free his feet, but while exerting the powerful muscles of his legs for that purpose it occurred to him that a disturbance of the rubbish which held them might discharge the

rifle; how it could have endured what had already befallen it he could not understand, although memory assisted him with several instances in point. One in particular he recalled, in which in a moment of mental abstraction he had clubbed his rifle and beaten out another gentleman's brains, observing afterward that the weapon which he had been diligently swinging by the muzzle was loaded, capped, and at full cock--knowledge of which circumstance would doubtless have cheered his antagonist to longer endurance. He had always smiled in recalling that blunder of his "green and salad days" as a soldier, but now he did not smile. He turned his eyes again to the muzzle of the rifle and for a moment fancied that it had moved; it seemed somewhat nearer.

Again he looked away. The tops of the distant trees beyond the bounds of the plantation interested him: he had not before observed how light and feathery they were, nor how darkly blue the sky was, even among their branches, where they somewhat paled it with their green; above him it appeared almost black. "It will be uncomfortably hot here," he thought, "as the day advances. I wonder which way I am looking."

Judging by such shadows as he could see, he decided that his face was due north; he would at least not have the sun in his eyes, and north--well, that was toward his wife and children.

"Bah!" he exclaimed aloud, "what have they to do with it?"

He closed his eyes. "As I can't get out I may as well go to sleep. The rebels are gone and some of our fellows are sure to stray out here foraging. They'll find me."

But he did not sleep. Gradually he became sensible of a pain in his forehead--a dull ache, hardly perceptible at first, but growing more and more uncomfortable. He opened his eyes and it was gone--closed them and it returned. "The devil!" he said, irrelevantly, and stared again at the sky. He heard the singing of birds, the strange metallic note of the meadow lark, suggesting the clash of vibrant blades. He fell into pleasant memories of his childhood, played again with his brother and sister, raced across the fields, shouting to alarm the sedentary larks, entered the sombre forest beyond and with timid steps followed the faint path to Ghost Rock, standing at last with audible heart-throbs before Dead Man's Cave and seeking to penetrate its awful mystery. For the first time he observed that the opening of the haunted cavern was encircled by a ring of metal. Then all else vanished and left him gazing into the barrel of his rifle as before. But whereas before it had seemed near, it now seemed an inconceivable distance away, and all the more sinister for that. He cried out and, startled by something in his own voice--the note of fear--lied to himself in denial: "If I don't sing out I may stay here till I die."

He now made no further attempt to evade the menacing stare of the gun barrel. If he turned away his eyes an instant it was to look for assistance (although he could not see the ground on either side the ruin), and he permitted them to return, obedient to the imperative fascination. If he closed them it was from weariness, and instantly the poignant pain in his forehead--the prophecy and menace of the bullet--forced him to reopen them.

The tension of nerve and brain was too severe; nature came to his relief with intervals of unconsciousness. Reviving from one of these he became sensible of a sharp, smarting pain in his right hand, and when he worked his fingers together, or rubbed his palm with them, he could feel that they were wet and slippery. He could not see the hand, but he knew the sensation; it was running blood.

In his delirium he had beaten it against the jagged fragments of the wreck, had clutched it full of splinters. He resolved that he would meet his fate more manly. He was a plain, common soldier, had no religion and not much philosophy; he could not die like a hero, with great and wise last words, even if there had been some one to hear them, but he could die "game," and he would. But if he could only know when to expect the shot!

Some rats which had probably inhabited the shed came sneaking and scampering about. One of them mounted the pile of debris that held the rifle; another followed and another. Searing regarded them at first with indifference, then with friendly interest; then, as the thought flashed into his bewildered mind that they might touch the trigger of his rifle, he cursed them and ordered them to go away. "It is no business of yours," he cried.

The creatures went away; they would return later, attack his face, gnaw away his nose, cut his throat--he knew that, but he hoped by that time to be dead.

Nothing could now unfix his gaze from the little ring of metal with its black interior. The pain in his forehead was fierce and incessant. He felt it gradually penetrating the brain more and more deeply, until at last its progress was arrested by the wood at the back of his head. It grew momentarily more insufferable: he began wantonly beating his lacerated hand against the splinters again to counteract that horrible ache. It seemed to throb with a slow, regular recurrence, each pulsation sharper than the preceding, and sometimes he cried out, thinking he felt the fatal bullet. No thoughts of home, of wife and children, of country, of glory. The whole record of memory was effaced. The world had passed away--not a vestige remained. Here in this confusion of timbers and boards is the sole universe. Here is immortality in time--each pain an everlasting life. The throbs tick off eternities.

Jerome Searing, the man of courage, the formidable enemy, the strong, resolute warrior, was as pale as a ghost. His jaw was fallen; his eyes protruded; he trembled in every fibre; a cold sweat bathed his entire body; he screamed with fear. He was not insane--he was terrified.

In groping about with his torn and bleeding hand he seized at last a strip of board, and, pulling, felt it give way. It lay parallel with his body, and by bending his elbow as much as the contracted space would permit, he could draw it a few inches at a time. Finally it was altogether loosened from the wreckage covering his legs; he could lift it clear of the ground its whole length. A great hope came into his mind: perhaps he could work it upward, that is to say backward, far enough to lift the end and push aside the rifle; or, if that were too tightly wedged, so place the strip of board as to deflect the bullet. With this object he passed it backward inch by inch, hardly daring to breathe lest that act somehow defeat his intent, and more than ever unable to remove his eyes from the rifle, which might perhaps now hasten to improve its waning opportunity. Something at least had been gained: in the occupation of his mind in this attempt at self-defense he was less sensible of the pain in his head and had ceased to wince. But he was still dreadfully frightened and his teeth rattled like castanets.

The strip of board ceased to move to the suasion of his hand. He tugged at it with all his strength, changed the direction of its length all he could, but it had met some extended obstruction behind him and the end in front was still too far away to clear the pile of debris and reach the muzzle of the gun. It extended, indeed, nearly as far as the trigger guard, which, uncovered by the rubbish, he could imperfectly see with his right eye. He tried to break the strip with his hand, but had no leverage. In his defeat, all his terror returned, augmented tenfold. The black aperture of the rifle appeared to

threaten a sharper and more imminent death in punishment of his rebellion. The track of the bullet through his head ached with an intenser anguish. He began to tremble again.

Suddenly he became composed. His tremor subsided. He clenched his teeth and drew down his eyebrows. He had not exhausted his means of defense; a new design had shaped itself in his mind--another plan of battle. Raising the front end of the strip of board, he carefully pushed it forward through the wreckage at the side of the rifle until it pressed against the trigger guard. Then he moved the end slowly outward until he could feel that it had cleared it, then, closing his eyes, thrust it against the trigger with all his strength! There was no explosion; the rifle had been discharged as it dropped from his hand when the building fell. But it did its work.

Lieutenant Adrian Searing, in command of the picket-guard on that part of the line through which his brother Jerome had passed on his mission, sat with attentive ears in his breastwork behind the line. Not the faintest sound escaped him; the cry of a bird, the barking of a squirrel, the noise of the wind among the pines--all were anxiously noted by his overstrained sense. Suddenly, directly in front of his line, he heard a faint, confused rumble, like the clatter of a falling building translated by distance. The lieutenant mechanically looked at his watch. Six o'clock and eighteen minutes. At the same moment an officer approached him on foot from the rear and saluted.

"Lieutenant," said the officer, "the colonel directs you to move forward your line and feel the enemy if you find him. If not, continue the advance until directed to halt. There is reason to think that the enemy has retreated."

The lieutenant nodded and said nothing; the other officer retired. In a moment the men, apprised of their duty by the non-commissioned officers in low tones, had deployed from their rifle-pits and were moving forward in skirmishing order, with set teeth and beating hearts.

This line of skirmishers sweeps across the plantation toward the mountain. They pass on both sides of the wrecked building, observing nothing. At a short distance in their rear their commander comes. He casts his eyes curiously upon the ruin and sees a dead body half buried in board and timbers. It is so covered with dust that its clothing is Confederate gray. Its face is yellowish white; the cheeks are fallen in, the temples sunken, too, with sharp ridges about them, making the forehead forbiddingly narrow; the upper lip, slightly lifted, shows the white teeth, rigidly clenched. The hair is heavy with moisture, the face as wet as the dewy grass all about. From his point of view the officer does not observe the rifle; the man was apparently killed by the fall of the building.

"Dead a week," said the officer curtly, moving on and absently pulling out his watch as if to verify his estimate of time. Six o'clock and forty minutes.

Focus on AO2 – Analysis of the methods writers use to give meaning to narratives

[Methods of Structure, Form and Language]

1. What do we know about the character of Jerome Searing?

2. What characterisation methods does Bierce use to establish these character traits?
3. How does the author manipulate our feelings of sympathy for Jerome Searing?
4. Where and when is the story set?
5. What devices does the author use that give the reader a feel for the setting and the time in which the story takes place?
6. How many voices are heard in the story?
7. Can you identify what type of narrator the story has?
8. What evidence is there that the narrator is reliable?
9. Does the narrative perspective shift at all? Does the narrator see things from more than one character's point of view?
10. Does the author use flashback (analepsis) at all in the story? Give an example and say how this adds meaning to the story.
11. The author uses prolepsis (foreshadowing) in the story with the line "But it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him". What effect is achieved by this?
12. Is there an example of repetitive discrepancy of frequency in the narrative, where a single event is narrated more than once? What effect is achieved by this?
13. What devices does the writer use to depict Searing's semi-conscious state?
14. How long is Searing actually trapped in the wrecked house for before he dies?
15. What devices are used to decelerate the narrative, to slow things down and make it feel like Searing is trapped for much longer?
16. What devices are used by the writer to create tension during the section of the story where Searing is trapped and his life is threatened by the cocked rifle?
17. The author decided not to finish the story on the line "But Jerome Searing was dead". Instead he continued for another paragraph. What effect is achieved by this?
18. Are there any narrative gaps in this story (any key events missed out of the narrative)? If so what? Why are they left out?
19. What effect is created by the contrasted descriptions of Jerome Searing dead and Jerome Searing alive?
20. What genre would you say this short story is?