# The Canterville Ghost Study Guide

## The Canterville Ghost by Oscar Wilde

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

"The Canterville Ghost" was first published serially in 1887 in *Court and Society Review*, a magazine for the leisured upper classes. The story did not immediately receive much critical attention, and indeed Wilde was not viewed as an important author until the publication, during the 1890s, of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and of several well-received plays, including *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In 1891, "The Canterville Ghost" was republished in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, and Other Stories.*

The collected stories were severely criticized by contemporary reviewers; early critics found Wilde's work unoriginal and derivative. More recently critics have celebrated Wilde's ability to play with the conventions of many genres. In "The Canterville Ghost," Wilde draws upon fairy tales, Gothic novels, and stories of Americans abroad to shape his comic ghost story. Though Wilde offers a comic treatment, he finds inspiration for Sir Simon's character in Alfred Tennyson's serious poem "Maud," as well as in the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel." Critics also point to the possible influence of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) on "The Canterville Ghost."

Wilde used a myriad of comic sources to shape his story. Thomas De Quincey's "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," a satirical essay, is one apparent source. Wilde would also have been aware of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), a parody of the Gothic novel so popular in the early nineteenth century. Finally, Wilde's own experience on the lecture circuit in the United States undoubtedly helped him ridicule stereotypical American behavior. Indeed, one of the major themes in the story is the culture clash between a sixteenth-century English ghost and a late nineteenth-century American family. But the story also examines the disparity between the public self and the private self, a theme to which Wilde would return again in his later writings.

# Author Biography

An important figure in the literary Decadence movement, a literary movement that challenged Victorian standards at the end of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde lived a life that shocked conventional standards and eventually led to the dismissal of much of his work. Born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854, he was the son of William Wilde (later knighted), a surgeon, and Jane Francesca Elgee, a writer who used the pseudonym Speranza. Wilde attended both Trinity College in Dublin and Oxford University, and later settled in London. Influenced by the English writer, Walter Pater, Wilde embarked on a literary career and published *Poems* in 1881.

He married Constance Lloyd, a wealthy Dubliner, in 1884, and they had two children, Cyril and Vyvyan Holland. As the editor of *Woman's World,* Wilde espoused the values of aestheticism and his belief in "life for art's sake." His wardrobe included green carnation buttonholes and velvet knee breeches; not surprisingly, his attire attracted both followers and parody. Most notably, in 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan wrote *Patience*, a comic opera that ridiculed both the aesthetic movement and Wilde.

Wilde's work enjoyed a great deal of critical success from 1888 to 1895, when he published his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and his popular plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These plays satired contemporary high society and treated potentially serious issues with wit and humor.

Wilde's world exploded at the height of his popularity. Beginning in 1886, Wilde was involved in homosexual relationships, first with Robert Ross, and later (and more disastrously) with Lord Alfred Douglas, a poet. When the Marquis of Queensberry, Lord Alfred's father, accused Wilde of homosexuality in 1895, Wilde denied the charge and sued for libel. Not only did Wilde lose the libel suit, he was arrested and sentenced to two years hard labor for "gross indecency between male persons." The scandal destroyed Wilde's reputation and health. Though he produced serious poems, collected in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) as well as an essay confession De Profundis (1905) while in prison, Wilde did not write after his release. Divorced and bankrupt, Wilde wandered through Europe under the assumed name Sebastian Melmoth until his death in Paris in 1900.

# Plot Summary

## Purchasing Canterville Chase

As the story opens, Horace B. Otis, the brusque American minister, ignores the warnings of several English friends and buys the haunted Canterville Chase. Lord Canterville desires to sell the home but feels honor-bound to tell Otis stories of skeleton hands and mysterious noises. However, Otis refuses to believe in the existence of ghosts.

## The Persistent Blood Stain

The Otis family moves into the Chase, a Tudor mansion. Mrs. Lucretia Otis, disturbed by a blood stain in the sitting-room, orders that it be removed at once. But the housekeeper, Mrs. Umney, explains that the blood stain dates back to 1575, the day Lady Eleanore de Canterville was murdered by her husband, Sir Simon, and cannot be removed. Washington Otis, the oldest son, quickly declares that Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent will prove a match for even so historic a stain. Before the housekeeper can stop him, Washington drops to his knees and scrubs out the blood. Thunder and lightening greet his success, and Mrs. Umney faints in fear. The stain, however, reappears the following morning, and again Pinkerton's is applied. But each successive morning brings a new stain, and the Otises begin to believe that the Chase really is haunted.

## The Ghost Appears

Several nights later, Mr. Otis awakes to the sound of clanking metal. In the hallway, he encoun ters a ghost with burning-red eyes, matted hair, and heavy chains. As a practical American, Mr. Otis suggests to the Ghost that Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator will quiet his chains. The Ghost, stunned by this effrontery, is further insulted as the young Otis twin boys throw pillows at his head. The Ghost retires to his chamber and ponders his past glories of terrifying housemaids and driving members of the aristocracy to madness and suicide. Refusing to be intimidated by upstart Americans, the Ghost plans his revenge. Meanwhile, the Otises discuss the Ghost and note the changing hues of the sittingroom bloodstain. Only the beautiful fifteen-yearold Virginia Otis cannot laugh as the stain mutates from red, to purple, to bright emerald green. When the Ghost next appears, the twins shoot pellets at it. But more insulting is that after the Ghost tries to scare the family with a hideous laugh, Mrs. Otis offers him Dr. Dobell's tincture to cure his indigestion.

Sickened by the experience, Sir Simon retreats for a few days before making another attempt to horrify the Otises. However, when the Ghost next appears, it is he who is

frightened. The twins create a fake ghost out of a hollow turnip, bed curtain, kitchen cleaver, and broom. Their trick succeeds, and Sir Simon, humiliated, gives up on his bloodstain and begins to use Mr. Otis's Rising Sun Lubricator. The twins continue to torment the Ghost, setting traps along the corridor to trip him. The Ghost, in one final effort, prepares an elaborate costume, "Reckless Rupert, or the headless Earl," to revenge himself on the twins. When he tries to enter the twins' bedroom, a jug of water crashes down on him, leaving Sir Simon with a severe cold and no hope of scaring the Otises.

## Virginia Otis and the Canterville Ghost

As the Ghost dreams of his past glory, the Otis family carries on with their normal pursuits. The young Duke of Cheshire, madly in love with Virginia, arrives as a guest. One day after riding with the Duke, Virginia stumbles upon the Ghost's hiding place. Pitying him, Virginia entreats Sir Simon to behave himself. But, in a well-known passage, the Ghost replies:

"It is absurd asking me to behave myself," he answered, looking around in astonishment at the pretty little girl who had ventured to address him, "quite absurd. I must rattle my chains, and groan through keyholes, and walk about at night. . . . It is my only reason for existing." "It is no reason at all for existing, and you know you have been very wicked. Mrs. Umney told us, the first day we arrived here, that you had killed your wife." "Well, I quite admit it," said the Ghost petulantly, "but it was a purely family matter, and concerned no one else." "It is very wrong to kill any one," said Virginia, who at times had a sweet Puritan gravity, caught from some old New England ancestor. "Oh, I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery. Why, there was a buck I had shot in Hogley Woods, a magnificent pricket, and do you know how she had it sent up to table? However, it is no matter now, for it is all over, and I don't think it was very nice of her brothers to starve me to death, though I did kill her." (Excerpt from "The Canterville Ghost")

Though she berates him for stealing her paints to refurbish the blood stain, this exchange marks the beginning of Virginia's sympathy for the Ghost. Virginia offers to help the Ghost emigrate to America. He declines claiming that all he wants is to sleep in the Garden of Death. Sir Simon asks Virginia to pray for his soul, so that he can finally rest. Despite the pleas of the huntsmen embroidered on the tapestry and the gargoyles carved on the chimneypiece, Virginia takes the Ghost's hand and follows him into another dimension.

## Virginia Lost and Found

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Mr. Otis, an American Minister, buys a property in England called Canterville Chase, against the advice of his friends and the owner himself, Lord Canterville, who assures him that it is haunted. Lord Canterville's family has chosen not to live there because of the ghost. His grandaunt never recovered from her fright caused by two skeleton hands grabbing her shoulders. Mr. Otis says that he does not believe there is such a thing as a ghost, and says he will take the house and the ghost if it does indeed come with it. Lord Canterville replies that the ghost's existence has been well known since 1584, and always appears before the death of a member of his family.

A few weeks later, when the purchase is complete, the family moves into Canterville Chase. Mr. Otis is accompanied by his wife, who is a good-looking woman of good health, and their four children. The eldest is a son named Washington, a handsome, sensible young man who is also good at dancing. Virginia is the only daughter, and is fifteen years old. She is "lithe and lovely" and an accomplished rider. She even beat the young Duke of Cheshire in a race, and he was so impressed by her he proposed to her. The youngest children are the twins, otherwise known as the "stars and stripes" because they are always being switched for their mischievousness.

The Otises have a lovely drive to their new property, seeing squirrels, rabbits and birds along the way. However, as they approach Canterville Chase, the sky becomes dark, and everything is very still. The housekeeper, Mrs. Umney, greets them and tells them about the bloodstain on the library floor when asked by Mrs. Otis. She tells them that the stain mysteriously cannot be removed, and is the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville who was murdered there by here husband, Sir Simon, in 1575. Sir Simon lived for another nine years, but then mysteriously disappeared. His body was never found, but his ghost haunts the house. Washington says her story is nonsense, and proceeds to remove the stain with stain remover. There is a clap of thunder and Mrs. Umney faints. When she awakes, Mrs. Umney warns the Otis' to be wary because she has seen the truth of the ghost's existence, and has spent many sleepless nights in the house. All of the Otises, however, state that they are not afraid of ghosts.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The Otis family can be seen as a paragon of American culture. Mrs. Otis is described as having been a "celebrated New York belle" in her youth. The oldest son is named Washington, after the first president of the United States; the second child, Virginia, is named for a state, coincidentally it is the state Washington was from; and the twins are only known as the "stars and stripes" referring to the American flag.

A major theme in this work is the culture clash between American and British culture. Oscar Wilde plays upon the stereotypes of both cultures to make fun of them. The Americans are presented as materialistic, practical people who have no sense of personal history, and who refuse to believe anything they cannot quantify with common sense. The British possess refined tastes, and determinedly guard their traditions and history.

We begin to see this theme introduced in the conversation between Mr. Otis, an American Republican, and Lord Canterville, an English Aristocrat. Lord Canterville knows the ghost of Canterville to be real, and attempts to convince Mr. Otis by citing examples of encounters his family has had with the ghost. Mr. Otis will not be convinced, stating that since America is taking everything worth having from Europe such as their "best actors and prima-donnas," if there were such a thing as a ghost he would have already seen one in America. When Lord Canterville warns Mr. Otis that the ghost always appears before a member of his family dies Mr. Otis replies, "well, so does the family doctor for that matter, Lord Canterville; but there is no such thing, sir, as a ghost." While this statement demonstrates Mr. Otises American confidence in the scientific laws of nature, which do not allow for elements of the supernatural, the fact that Lord Canterville does not understand the statement shows how different the two cultures are. They speak the same language, but do not understand each other.

The qualities seen in Mr. Otis are also seen in his son. When the housekeeper tells them about the mystical bloodstain that cannot be removed, Washington replies, "That is all nonsense... Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent will clean it up in no time," and quickly cleans up the three hundred year old stain. This event also reveals the Cantervilles as somewhat ridiculous, because they could have cleaned the stain, but believed the story of it so much, that they never tried.

The first chapter also contains elements typical to the genre of gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The setting is an old house with dark wood paneling, pictures of family ancestors, and as we will later learn, suits of armor and secret passageways. The description of the house as well as the weather, which is often gloomy or stormy, creates an atmosphere that suggests terrible things are going to happen. The tension builds when the chapter ends with the housekeeper warning the family that she has a feeling something bad is going to happen.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

The storm continues all night, but nothing else happens. In the morning, however, the bloodstain that Washington removed is back. He continues to remove the stain for three days, and each morning it is back. The family all begins to believe that there must really be a ghost in the house.

That evening, the family goes out for a drive, returning at 9:00 to a light supper. They do not think of the ghost all evening, and go to bed around 11:00. At 1:00 in the morning, Mr. Otis is awoken by a noise in the hallway like metal clanking together. Mr. Otis grabs a bottle of Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, and opens the bedroom door to see a scary looking man in chains. Mr. Otis sets the lubricator on the floor, and asks that the ghost use it on his chains because they are making a great deal of noise. He then returns to his bedroom and goes to sleep.

In anger, the ghost smashes the bottle on the floor and races upstairs groaning, when a pillow is thrown at his head. The ghost vanishes through the wall in order to escape, and rushes to his secret room in the house that no one knows about. He is appalled at what just happened. In his three hundred years of being a ghost, he has not failed at terrifying someone. He reflects on some of his most successful performances in which people fainted, had a fit, or never returned to the house; even a butler shot his self because he was so scared. The ghost considers himself an artist and is deeply insulted at this modern American family's behavior. He proudly thinks of his many different disguises such as "Red Rueben," "Gaunt Gibeon," and "the Blood sucker of Bexley Moore," and vows to get revenge on the family. He sits up all night planning how he will do it.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, the Otises finally admit they may have been wrong in their denial of the ghost's existence. However, their reactions to this realization coincide with the American stereotypes already established. Mrs. Otis joins the Psychical society to understand the ghost better, which is a society whose purpose is to study paranormal occurrences in a scientific way. Similarly, Washington writes a letter to "Messrs Myers and Podmore" about the reappearing stain. Myers and Podmore were two psychologists interested in psychical matters, and wrote a book called, *Phantasms of the Living.*

Although the Otises now believe in the ghost, they are unaffected by their new knowledge. They do not discuss the ghost at all during their day together. Their unrefined American tastes are reflected in their dinner conversation, which includes discussing the abilities of certain actresses, how difficult it is to get specific foods they want in England, how much nicer the New York accent is than the British, and how

efficient the baggage check system is when traveling by train. In contrast, a person of more refined tastes might discuss the theatre, wine or history over dinner. The portrayal of the Otises is also meant to show how uninterested Americans are in British culture. This conversation also reflects that trait, since, although they are new to England, the Otises do not discuss their impressions of their new surroundings at all, nor do they seem to explore them at all.

In this chapter the reader, and the Otises, finally meet the ghost. However, the event is not the terrifying experience it is expected to be. Mr. Otis calmly offers some lubricant to the ghost for his chains and returns to bed unfazed. His reaction reflects his practical personality, and the belief that everything can be taken care of in a rational way.

Ironically, the ghost is terribly upset by the encounter, having failed to scare someone for the first time in three hundred years. He thinks of some of his other encounters with previous inhabitants of the house, such as the Dowager Duchess whom he "frightened into a fit" just by standing next to her, or her maids became hysterical when he grinned at them through some curtains. The ghost's description of those encounters highlights the difference between the new American family and his past victims.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

In the morning, the family discusses the ghost. Mr. Otis is annoyed that his gift was not accepted. He tells the twins it was rude to throw the pillow at the ghost, but notes that if the ghost continues to refuse to use the lubricator, his chains will have to be taken from him otherwise none of them will get any sleep. Nothing else happens for a week, except that the bloodstain is always renewed every morning even though the door to the room is locked every night. It also begins to change color, from different shades of red to green. The family is very amused by this, except for Virginia, who becomes somewhat upset every time she sees the stain, most specifically the morning it is green.

Then on Sunday night, everyone is awoken by a loud crash in the hall. Mr. Otis and the twins rush out of their rooms to see a suit of armor laying on the ground, and the ghost sitting in a chair beside it, holding his knees and appearing to be in great agony. The twins get their peashooters and begin firing at the ghost; and Mr. Otis gets his revolver, points at the ghost and tells him to put his hands in the air. The ghost sweeps through them all "like a mist," extinguishing Mr. Otises candle as he passes, and letting out a demonic laugh, which has terrified people in the past. The laugh does not have the desired effect, however. Mrs. Otis emerges from her bedroom and gives the ghost a bottle of "Dr. Dobell's tincture" because she believes the ghost must be ill. The ghost is extremely angry at Mrs. Otis' kindness and prepares to turn into a large black dog to frighten her. However, he is frightened by the twins approaching and vanishes with a groan instead.

Back in his room, the ghost is very upset because of the twins and Mrs. Otis. However, he is particularly disappointed that he could not wear the suit of mail. He thought even this family would have been frightened by a suit of armor walking around by itself. The suit was his, and he had worn it in many tournaments, but when he tried to put it on the weight was too much for him and he fell onto the concrete floor, badly bruising his knees.

The ghost was ill for a few days after the encounter and did not leave his room except to maintain the bloodstain. On Friday, he finally feels well enough to attempt to frighten the family again. He chooses his wardrobe carefully, including a rusty dagger in the get-up. He plans to go to Washington's room first because he has a grudge against him for continuing to remove the bloodstain. He will "gibber at [Washington] from the foot of the bed, and stab himself three times in the throat to the sound of slow music." He will then proceed to Mr. and Mrs. Otis' room where he will "place a clammy hand on Mrs. Otises forehead, while he hisses into her trembling husband's ear the awful secrets of the charnel-house." For Virginia, he will only groan from the wardrobe since she had never really done anything to insult him. His scariest plan is for the twins whom he wants to teach a lesson. He will sit on their chests, then "stand between them in the form of a green, icy-cold corpse, till they became paralyzed with fear, and finally, to throw off the

winding-sheet, and crawl round the room, with white, bleached bones and one rolling eyeball, in the character of 'Dumb Daniel.'"

The weather is perfect for his plan: it is stormy and the wind groans outside the house. The ghost creeps to Washington's room to begin carrying out his plan. However, as he comes around the corner of the hallway he meets a hideous and terrifying ghost. The ghost, Sir Simon, is terrified of this new ghost and flees back to his secret room where he jumps into bed and hides in the covers. After awhile he resolves to go back and speak to the ghost in the morning, since "two ghosts are better than one," and with another ghost's help he might be able to terrify the Otises properly. When he returns to where he saw the other ghost, Sir Simon notices that it looks differently. He rushes up and grabs its arms; the head falls off, and Sir Simon sees that the "ghost" is nothing more than a bed sheet, a broom and a hollow turnip. Sir Simon reads the sign around the ghost's neck that reads, "YE OTIS GHOSTE/ Ye Onlie true and Originale Spook/ Beware of Ye Imitationes/ All others are Counterfeite," and realizes he has been tricked. The ghost invokes a curse against the family, which is supposed to be confirmed by the cock crowing twice. However, the cock only crows once after his invocation, and the ghost is angry that even his curse did not work. He lies down in a coffin to wait until night.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

In the previous chapter, the ghost vows revenge against the American family for making a fool of him. There is a chance that the foreboding created in the first chapter may still come to fruition. However, in this chapter, the ghost's attempts at terrifying the family are made completely comical. The next time he is seen, he has tried to put on his old suit of armor, and only succeeded in dropping on the floor and hurting himself. The family comes out of their rooms to see him sitting there in pain, and they try to hold him at gunpoint. Thus far, the Otises' practical outlook on life, and the ghost, have kept them from being bothered by the ghost. However, their attempt to hold a ghost at gunpoint is completely ridiculous, and shows that they take their practicality too far.

The ghost understands that the Otises think differently than the other British families he has terrified in the past. Therefore, he attempts to understand the way they think, and does something they will find scary. He thought the armor would work "for no more sensible reason, at least out of respect for their national poet Longfellow." The ghost is familiar one of America's most celebrated poets, and tries to use that knowledge against the Otises. It would be interesting to know if his plan would have worked had he been able to put on the suit of armor. Instead, he is again humiliated in front of the family.

This scene is also interesting in that the ghost, an example of a truly British character, shows knowledge of American culture, while the Americans do not show any knowledge of British culture anywhere in the story. He also admits to enjoying Longfellow's poetry himself, which he describes as "graceful and attractive." This confession from the ghost is curious, since the clash between cultures is such a major theme in the story. Why should the ghost enjoy an American poet? A possible answer is that Longfellow was a

great admirer of British poetry, and wrote homages to some of Britain's most famous poets such as Chaucer and Milton. Longfellow was an American with a knowledge and love of British culture.

Sir Simon's attempts to frighten the Otis family in this chapter portray him as a kind of comedic actor in a stage play. He has a number of costumes he uses for his purposes, and has mentioned some of the characters he imitates such as "Dumb Daniel," "Suicide's Skeleton" and "Martin the Maniac." The ghost not only dresses up like these characters, but actually acts the part, as we see in his description of how he going to scare the twins by acting as "Dumb Daniel." The idea of the ghost as a stage actor is strengthened when we see him, in preparation for the night's events, "[spend] most of that day in looking over his wardrobe, ultimately deciding in favor of a large slouched hat with a red feather, a winding-sheet frilled at the wrists and neck, and a rusty dagger. The ghost takes great care in his acting. However, all of his careful planning comes to nothing when he is frightened by what he thinks to be another ghost. It is ironic that the ghost plans to do the scaring, but ends up being scared himself by a fake ghost.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The ghost is tired after the previous night's events. He is nervous and jumpy due to the events of the previous four weeks. As a result, he stays in his secret room for five days, and decides to give up trying to maintain the bloodstain on the floor. He thinks that the Otises are not worthy of the stain since they do not want it. However, he decides he must continue to "appear in the corridor once a week, and to gibber from the large oriel window on the first and third Wednesday in every month," since those are his duties as a ghost. However, when he walks the corridors once a week, as is his duty, he does it as quietly as possible in order not to attract attention. In addition, he uses the "Rising Sun Lubricator" on his chains, having stolen a bottle from Mr. Otis' bedroom.

However, the twins do still not leave him alone. He trips over string strung across hallways, and slips on butter left on the staircase. As a result, he decides to get even with the twins, and reassert his dignity. He will visit them dressed up as Reckless Rupert or Headless Earl.

He spends three hours preparing his self, even though some parts of his costume are missing. When he gets to the twins' room, he throws open the door, attempting a frightful entrance, when a jug of water falls on his head. The twins burst out laughing while the ghost hurries back to his room. He comes down with a cold the next day.

The ghost completely gives up trying to scare the "rude American family," and wanders quietly about the house keeping to his self. On September 19th, he is wandering the house at night as usual, dressed up as "Jonas the Graveless," when someone shouts "boo!" from behind him. He is so frightened that he runs for the stairs, but Washington is there. He is surrounded, but escapes by vanishing into the stove.

From that point onward, the ghost refuses to leave his room. The twins make innumerable plans to bother him should he reappear, but his feelings are hurt and he will not come out.

The Otis' think the ghost has finally left, but he has not. He plans to reappear when he learns that the young Duke Cheshire is a guest at the house. There is a story that the young Duke's great uncle bet that he would play cards with the Canterville ghost and he was found dead the next morning. The ghost wants to prove that he still has an influence over that family at least. However, at the last minute, his fear of the twins overcomes him and he does not leave his room.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

It is clear that the traditional roles of the ghost and the inhabitants of the haunted house have been reversed. Almost all of the encounters between the Otises and the ghost

have ended in the ghost running away in fear, instead of the other way around. At this point, the ghost is "very weak and tired...his nerves [are] completely shattered, and he [starts] at the slightest noise." Living with the Otises has made him into a complete wreck. Moreover, even though he makes one final attempt in this chapter at scaring the family, he is again humiliated by the twins, and gives up trying to scare them at all. He continues to walk the halls quietly, and one night the twins and Washington manage to surround him. The reversal of the ghost and the family is made complete here as the ghost is "seized with a panic, which, under the circumstances, [is] only natural," and barely escapes to his room, which he no longer leaves.

That the ghost is 'naturally' terrified of children is extremely comical, and contributes to the mockery of the British characters. It seems that while the over-practical American characters are afraid of nothing, not even an admittedly scary looking ghost, the British characters are afraid of anything, including children and fake ghosts made of bed sheets and empty turnips.

Another reversal of a traditionally gothic element is the story seen through the ghost's experience. In gothic novels, the story is always told by the human inhabitants of a haunted house or castle. The supernatural characters are seen very little. However, in traditional gothic novels, the humans are the ones experiencing terror. In this novel, the ghost is experiencing terror, and therefore, is the one to tell the story.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

A few days later, Virginia tears her dress while out riding. Upon arriving home, she goes up the back stairs, so no one will see her. She passes the sewing room where she thinks she sees her mother's maid. However, when she goes in, she sees it is the ghost sitting looking forlornly out the window. She tells him she feels sorry for him, and informs him that her brothers are leaving for Eton the next day, and if he behaves, no one will bother him. He explains that he cannot behave because the purpose of his existence is to rattle his chains and groan, etc. She says that that is not a good existence and he is bad for having killed his wife. He defends himself by saying that she was a bad wife and it is no one else's business. He tells Virginia that his wife's brothers starved him to death.

The ghost tells Virginia she is nicer and more honest than the rest of her awful family. Virginia says it is he who is dishonest. She knows he was reapplying the bloodstain in the library with her paints, but did not tell anyone. She was very upset at her paints going missing. She could not paint sunsets once her reds were taken, and was finally only able to paint moonscapes because her green and yellow were gone too. The ghost is shocked that she knows about that, but does not comment further. The ghost is somewhat rude to Virginia, telling her he would not like America when she suggests he should try going there. She turns to leave, promising she will ask that the twins stay home at least another week. The ghost begs her to stay. He says he is lonely and unhappy, and he only wants to sleep, for he has not done so in 300 years. She asks if he can sleep anywhere, and he answers that there is one place, the Garden of Death, which is a pleasant and peaceful place. He longs to be able to enter there.

The ghost tells Virginia that she can help him get there. There is a prophecy written on the library window that says:

"When a golden girl can win Prayer from out the
lips of sin, When the barren almond bears, And
a little child gives away its tears, Then shall all
the house be still And peace come to Canterville."

The ghost tells her that the prophecy means she must "weep for [him] for [his] sins, because [he] has no tears, and pray with [him] for [his] soul, because [he] has no faith." Then the Angel of death might have mercy on him. Virginia agrees to help. The ghost takes her by the hand and they walk through the wall.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

As discussed in the previous chapter's analysis, this story reverses many conventions of traditional ghost stories and gothic works. The biggest departure from tradition is in the

presentation of the ghost as the protagonist. This is a very strange occurrence, and can be difficult to accept. However, as mentioned before, the ghost is terrified of the Otises, and we see the story through his eyes. The reader also feels sympathy for the ghost who has lost his dignity because of his inability to scare the Otises. In this chapter, that sympathy is heightened. When Virginia sees him sitting in the tapestry room, the description of him is touching: "he was sitting by the window, watching the ruined gold of the yellowing trees fly through the air, and the red leaves dancing madly down the long avenue; his head was leaning on his hand, and his whole attitude was one of extreme depression." In this description, we see emotion that has not been seen from any of the other characters. Throughout the book, until this point, the only emotion that has been seen is from the ghost; he has been angry, defeated, mischievous, brave, frightened and depressed. A depth of character is present in the depiction of the ghost that is not seen in anyone else.

The tone of the story shifts here also. The story began dark and foreboding, as a good gothic novel usually does. Readers learn that a man who killed his wife now haunts the house, and they expect to read about this ghost scaring the other characters. In the second chapter, the tone shifts to comedy as we see that the other characters scare the ghost. In addition, in this chapter, although there is comedy, the tone shifts to tragic. The ghost has paid for his crimes for three hundred years, is weary and just wants to be forgiven and allowed to rest.

Virginia, who has not played a major role in the story until this point, is presented in quite a different way from the other members of her family. She feels something other than curiosity at the ghost, and seeks to understand him by listening to him rather than wanting to study him, or joining a Psychical society as her mother does. She treats the ghost as a person, and therefore, is able to have pity for his situation, and weeps for him. Her emotional depth allows her to want to help the ghost in a significant way, and not just by giving him some lubricant so his chains will not wake people up at night.

Why Virginia is so different from the rest of the Otises is hard to explain. Often in nineteenth century writing, virginity and childhood were equated with innocence. The name Virginia, while a very American name, may also be a reference to her innocence. This idea is supported in the way she is described always as a "sweet girl," a "pretty little girl," and "little Virginia," even though she is fifteen. Her conversation with the ghost also sounds like something that would come from a much younger girl. As an innocent young girl, Virginia may not yet have developed the skepticism and practicality that comes with age, allowing her to better understand and connect with the ghost.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Ten minutes after Virginia leaves with the ghost, the bell for tea rings. A servant is sent to find Virginia, but cannot. No one is worried because Virginia often goes out to gather flowers for the dinner table at this time. At 6:00, Virginia has still not returned, and Mrs. Otis sends the boys out to find her; they are unsuccessful. Everyone is very worried, and Mr. Otis remembers he gave a band of gypsies permission to stay on his land. He fears they may have kidnapped Virginia. However, when he goes to question them, he finds they have left, which increases his suspicions. Mr. Otis contacts the authorities, then goes out again to look for Virginia himself. The young Duke, Cecil is very upset about Virginia's disappearance and goes with Mr. Otis. They check at the railway station, but no one matching Virginia's description has been seen there. They check a village that the gypsies are known to frequent, but find nothing, and return home.

When Mr. Otis and Cecil return home, they learn that the gypsies were located, but Virginia was not with them. Four of the gypsies even stayed to help look for her. The pond is then dragged in case she fell into it, but she is not found there either. The search is given up for the night. Just as the family is about to go to bed, there is a crash, the sound of thunder, and strange music and Virginia appears out of a panel in the wall holding a small casket in her hand.

Everyone is extremely relieved that Virginia is back. However, Mr. Otis is somewhat angry, thinking Virginia had been playing a trick on them. She tells them she has been with the ghost, and he is dead now. She says he was sorry for his wickedness and gave her a box of jewels, which is the casket she holds in her hand.

Virginia leads her stunned family through the secret corridor to the ghost's secret room. In it is a skeleton chained to the wall with a jug, once full of water, just out of its reach. Virginia says that God has forgiven the ghost. Cecil is moved by Virginia's tenderness, and calls her an angel and kisses her.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The majority of this chapter is meant to make the reader believe that the ghost's intentions were not good after all, and he has done something horrible to Virginia. There is a sense that the ghost has finally figured out what scares the Otises and has achieved his goal of terrifying them.

Emotion is also finally seen in the Otises who are distraught at Virginia's disappearance. This chapter serves to show that although the Americans are unrefined, materialistic and often ridiculous; they love their children. Familial love and duty are traits shared by the Americans and the British, despite their cultural differences, as will be seen in the following chapter as well.

We are also shown where Sir Simon spent the last days of his life, and why his ghost has been tied to the house for three hundred years. The image of the skeleton chained to the wall with water just out of his reach is very depressing, and conveys what misery the last moments of his human life must have been. It also conveys how miserable his life must have been for the last 300 years with his spirit bound to the house and unable to rest.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Four days later, a funeral is held for the ghost. He is given a rich coffin covered with the Canterville coat of arms, and the hearse is followed by an impressive procession of servants with torches and family members. Lord Canterville and his wife have come from Wales to be at the funeral also. The ghost's skeleton is buried in the churchyard under a yew tree.

The next morning Mr. Otis meets with Lord Canterville, urging him to take the jewels given to Virginia by the ghost, since they obviously belong to his family and are worth a lot of money. He mentions that Virginia only asks that she be allowed to keep the box in which the jewels were kept, in remembrance of the ghost. He is surprised his daughter is interested in anything so old, since Americans usually have no interest in such things.

Lord Canterville refuses to take the jewels. He says that Virginia rendered Sir Simon an invaluable service by allowing him to be finally at rest, and he is grateful to her as a result. Lord Canterville also laughingly suggests that if he took the jewels from Virginia, the ghost would be up out of his grave again and giving him a hard time. He points out that the jewels are not his legally anyway, since they have never been mentioned in a will, and were not known of at all. Lord Canterville will not change his mind about the jewels, and when Virginia, now the Duchess of Cheshire having married her childhood sweetheart Cecil, was presented to the Queen in 1890, she wore some of her jewels and they were widely admired.

The young couple were very much in love and very happy, and everyone was very happy for them. The Marchioness of Dumbleton was the only exception because she wanted the young Duke for one of her daughters. Mr. Otis was very fond of Cecil, but objected to his title, not liking titles in general.

After their honeymoon, the Duke and Duchess, Cecil and Virginia, return to Canterville Chase. They walk in the churchyard, and the Duchess set some roses on Sir Simon's grave. Sir Simon's tombstone bears his initials and the verse from the library window. The couple continues to stroll, and the Duke asks his wife what happened when she was with the ghost that day. The Duchess refuses to tell him because she owes much to the ghost who taught her what life and death are, and why love is stronger. The Duke relents, but he says, "You will tell our children some day, won't you?"

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The final chapter of the story shows Sir Simon finally put to rest in a pleasant spot, in the churchyard with a noble funeral. Virginia is the only one to show any emotion, weeping when she thinks of Sir Simon's description of the Garden of Death.

The discussion between Lord Canterville and Mr. Otis in this chapter, as in the first chapter, highlights the differences between the two men, and thus, their representative cultures. Out of gratitude for her helping Sir Simon, Lord Canterville happily relinquishes the jewels given to Virginia. Out of a feeling of legal obligation, Mr. Otis insists Lord Canterville take them back. Mr. Otis believes Lord Canterville will want them because they are of great monetary value, which is the only reason he himself would want them. He is especially surprised that Virginia should want to keep the box, since such a request shows that she has a tendency for "mediaevalism," which is not an American trait.

Virginia's conversation with Cecil in the old Abbey shows that although she may have lost the innocence she had when she helped save Simon; her experience with him has prevented her from inheriting her parent's skepticism and practicality, which inhibits them from being moved by anything out of the ordinary. She will not tell Cecil what happened exactly, only that he showed her "what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both." In other words, Simon has allowed her to have a different view of life than her parents, in which the extraordinary is possible, but not necessarily measurable by science, or understood by a Psychical society.

However, is that really the message of the story? It is true that the ghost does not affect the American characters; they are neither frightened nor awed by him. As a result, they seem to be boring and overly practical. However, it does not seem that there is anything to be scared or awed about. The ghost, although a rare and strange thing to see in one's house, resembles a stage actor various parts. He uses costumes, devises elaborate scenes and exploits stereotypically 'ghostly' behaviors such as groaning to try to frighten the inhabitants of the house. There is no malice in his actions, other than that he later wants revenge because the Otises refuse to be scared by him. He is easily frightened, and his feelings get hurt. Even the mysterious reappearing bloodstain turns out to be Virginia's paint.

Regardless of if one should be awed by ghosts or not, the primary theme of the story is forgiveness. Using a ghost story to explore this theme is not new, since ghosts usually are considered to be created by a lack of forgiveness somewhere in their lives. Simon needs to be forgiven before he can rest. However, someone must care enough to ask for that forgiveness for him-Virginia. This theme of forgiveness becomes more important in the context of the theme of cultural clashing between America and Britain. The history between America and Britain has been marred by wars such as the American Revolution, which lasted from 1775 until 1782. Moreover, the War of 1812 was still likely somewhat fresh in the memory when this story was written.

# Characters

## Sir Simon Canterville

*See* Ghost

## Cecil

*See* Duke of Cheshire

## Duke of Cheshire

Desperately in love with the fifteen-year old Virginia Otis, the boyish Duke of Cheshire proposes after watching her win a pony race. However, his guardians pack him off to Eton, and he must wait to marry. But his impetuousness cannot be quelled. When Virginia vanishes, he insists on being part of the search party. As soon as she reappears, he smothers her with kisses. His devotion is rewarded, and Virginia consents to become the Duchess of Cheshire.

## Ghost

The Ghost, or Sir Simon Canterville, has haunted Canterville Chase since he was starved to death in 1584 by his dead wife's brothers. They murdered him because he had murdered his wife for the trivial reasons that she was plain and a bad housekeeper. For three hundred years, Sir Simon has frightened the inhabitants of Canterville Chase and has relished his role as resident ghost. He has appeared as "The Headless Earl," "The Corpse-Snatcher of Chertsey Barn," and "The Blood-sucker of Bexley Moor" as well as other incarnations. However, when the rational American Otises arrive, the Ghost realizes that his audience does not appreciate his performance. No matter what he tries, he cannot frighten the Otis family. Weary and despairing, Sir Simon begs Virginia Otis to pray for him so that he can finally achieve eternal rest. Initially the butt of the twins's pranks and an annoyance to the practical Otises, the Ghost becomes an object of sympathy. Before he goes quietly to his grave, he gives Virginia a box of priceless jewels.

## Mr. Horace B. Otis

The boisterous head of the Otis family, Mr. Otis first dismisses tales of a ghost in his newly purchased English house, arguing that the modern country of America has already bought up anything of value from the Old World. Sir Simon is stunned when Mr. Otis demands that the ghost use Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to quiet his haunting chains so that the family may get some sleep. Mr. Otis is a calm man who scolds the

twin Otis boys for throwing pillows at the ghost, and then reasons that if the ghost will not use the lubricator, the family will take away his chains. Mr. Otis leads the search for the missing Virginia and eventually consents to letting her marry into the aristocracy.

## Mrs. Lucretia Tappan Otis

The spirited matriarch of the Otis clan, Mrs. Lucretia Tappan Otis, a former New York beauty, is renowned for her "superb profile." Sir Simon views her as a gross materialist because she offers him Dr. Dobell's tincture for indigestion; she has misunderstood his ghostly laugh as a sign of a medical disorder. Generally undisturbed by the Ghost's performances, Mrs. Otis introduces her neighbors to such American pleasures as clambakes. Except for understandable anxiety at Virginia's disappearance, Mrs. Otis possesses a "really wonderful amount of animal spirits."

## Virginia Otis

Virginia Otis, the somewhat puritanical, beautiful fifteen-year old daughter of the American Minister, has already inspired the love of the young Duke of Cheshire as the story begins. In the first part of the story, the reader does not learn much about Virginia's personality. She hangs back as the rest of her family either plots against the Ghost or attempts to cure him of his clanking chains and scratchy voice. When Virginia encounters Sir Simon, she pities him and tries to help the weary spirit. Sir Simon tells her that if she prays for him, he will finally gain eternal rest. She bravely takes his hand and, ignoring warning voices, follows him into another dimension. Later, Virginia marries the young Duke. Her husband entreats her to tell him what happened the fateful night with the Ghost, but she refuses. Virginia asserts, though, that she is grateful to Sir Simon, for he taught her that Love is stronger than both Death and Life.

## Stars and Stripes

*See* Twins

## Twins

The youngest children of the Otis family, the twins are wild hooligans. They throw pillows at the ghostly Sir Simon's head, hit him with their peashooters, and throw nuts along the corridor in an effort to trip the Ghost. Irrepressible, the twins achieve their greatest triumph when they create their own ghost from a hollowed-out turnip, a bed curtain, and a kitchen cleaver. Their constant pranks leave Sir Simon shaken, as his every plan for revenge is thwarted by the twins's efforts.

# Themes

## Culture Clash

From the beginning of "The Canterville Ghost," Wilde compares the behavior of the American Otises with that of the British upper classes. Lord Canterville warns Mr. Horace B. Otis that the presence of a ghost has made Canterville Chase uninhabitable. Mr. Otis, however, remains a skeptic. If there were any ghosts in Europe, he reasons, Americans would have bought them along with all that is old and venerable in Europe. Europe is for sale, and Americans are buying, which is why the Otises can purchase Canterville Chase in the first place. Even the Otises, who espouse American superiority, cannot deny the Ghost's existence after he appears to them in chains. But the Ghost, who has been scaring the wits out of the English aristocracy for three hundred years, cannot produce a scream from a single Otis. They counter his chains with lubricant, his bloodstains with Pinkerton's detergent, and his ghostly laugh with cough syrup. As Americans, they refuse to accept the dismal English weather, much less a noisy ghost.

In many ways, the Ghost represents all that is rotten and decaying in Europe. A murderer, he relishes choosing identities that will provoke particular horror in his victims. His many costume changes, from "The Headless Earl" to "The Bloodsucker of Bexley Moor," reveal his underlying shallowness. The Ghost plays a part, but there is no substance to him, or for that matter to the class he represents. Pitting the New World against the old, the Otises and their can-do attitude shake up tradition.

## Aesthetics

The Otises do not understand the aesthetics of the Ghost. Mr. Otis believes that bad English weather is due to overcrowding, that there is not enough good weather to go around. But he fails to make the connection between crashing thunder and lightening and a haunted, Gothic mansion. Likewise, when Mr. Otis offers Sir Simon (the Ghost) Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to oil his chains, Mr. Otis fails to appreciate the ghostliness of clanking metal. Sir Simon's artistry, be it his laugh or his chains, is overlooked by the Otises, who see the Ghost's attributes as problems to be solved.

But Sir Simon is a careful artist who longs for an understanding audience. Virginia Otis, the fifteen- year old daughter of the Minister, is also an artist. However, she longs to paint sunsets, and, as the Ghost has stolen her bright colors to refurbish his bloodstain, she is compelled to paint gloomy midnight scenes. Thus she enters into the Ghost's aesthetics and eventually follows him (tem (temporarily) into his world. Decadence lies behind the Ghost's artistry; he seeks no moral objective other than perfecting his art. Wilde, one of the English Decadents, believed in "art for art's sake," much like Sir Simon.

# Atonement and Forgiveness

While the Ghost's aesthetics and the culture clash between Americans and the British are treated comically in the story, the theme of atonement and forgiveness takes on a more serious tone. When Sir Simon first begins to speak with Virginia, he feels more victim than victimizer. After all, he has only murdered his wife, an ugly woman and a bad cook, while the Otis clan humiliates him at every turn. Virginia will not accept his version of events, but eventually pities him.

Sir Simon has not been able to sleep since his wife's brothers starved him to death three hundred years before. He seeks peace, but cannot find it on his own. Virginia must pray for him if he is ever truly to rest. By forgiving the Ghost, Virginia can fulfill the prophecy: "When a golden girl can win / Prayer from out the lips of sin, / When the barren almond bears, / And a little child gives away its tears, / Then shall all the house be still / And Peace come to Canterville." Pure of heart and unafraid in her innocence, Virginia consents to help the Ghost.

In doing so, Virginia also reconciles American and British values. She has accepted the tradition of the Ghost and melds it with her American sense of hope for a better future. She is rewarded with a casket of valuable jewels and, eventually, marriage to the young Duke of Cheshire. In Virginia, Wilde creates a fairy-tale princess who, open to both past and present, can atone for ancient sins and represent a hopeful future.

# Style

## Setting

"The Canterville Ghost" is set in the English countryside in the late nineteenth century. Canterville Chase, where most of the story takes place, is described in Gothic terms. It is an old mansion with secret rooms and passageways, long corridors, carved gargoyles, stained glass windows, and oak paneling. Portraits of long-dead Canterville ancestors, ancient tapestries, and a suit of armor add to the medieval-like setting. Frequent thunder and lightning storms also contribute to the gloomy atmosphere. In short, Canterville Chase seems to fit the stereotype of a haunted house.

## Stereotypes

Oscar Wilde explores several stereotypes in the story. Canterville Chase boasts the comic book attributes of a haunted house and would be immediately recognized as such by its contemporary audience. Similarly Mr. Horace B. Otis, as an outspoken republican who rejects European ascendancy and believes in the power of the American dollar, represents another stereotype. He and his family discuss the superiority of all things American, from accents to actresses. The Otises also embrace scientific rationalism and believe in the solutions promised by "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent" and "Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator."

Young Virginia Otis is described as a Puritan believing in the simple differences between right and wrong. American forthrightness is contrasted to the decadence and decrepitude of an outdated English aristocracy, embodied in the Ghost, Sir Simon. Sir Simon has no morals; he murdered his wife because she was a bad cook and plain. British aristocrats are seen as stuck in familiar patterns. For three hundred years, generations of Cantervilles accepted the presence of a ghost and did nothing to stop the cycle of hauntings. By contrast, the Otises scrub out blood stains and offer to oil the Ghost's creaky chains, proving that American common sense can outmatch tradition.

## Fairy Tale

Oscar Wilde explored fairy tale conventions in several of his works. In "The Canterville Ghost," he introduces Virginia Otis, a fairy-tale type heroine. Critics have likened her to the princess in "The Frog Prince." In that fairy tale, the princess has to put aside her ingrained dislike of amphibians, and, in a leap of faith, kiss the frog. Similarly, Virginia must believe that there is a soul worth saving in the murderous and grisly Sir Simon. Her actions lead to a happy ending: she marries a Duke and receives a casket of valuable jewels from the Ghost.

## Aestheticism and Decadence

Oscar Wilde was part of a late nineteenthcentury movement known as aestheticism or decadence. Proponents of this movement believed in "art for art's sake," and sometimes in "life for art's sake." In other words, the moral purpose of both art and life is to produce beauty. Beauty is the ultimate goal. In many ways, Sir Simon, the Canterville Ghost, practices such a credo. He painstakingly assembles costumes to represent true ghostliness more perfectly. He spends all his time studying and preparing the art of horror. The Otises, however, fail to appreciate his numerous incarnations and do not see the art behind his performances. Crass materialists, the Otises destroy the Ghost's art. They scrub out his carefully maintained bloodstain and finally convince him to oil his clanking chains. As a misunderstood artist, the Ghost gains the reader's sympathy. But in many ways, Sir Simon is a parody of the very movement to which his creator belonged.

# Historical Context

## Aesthetic Backlash

Oscar Wilde was a follower of the Aesthetic- also known as the Decadent Movement- which had developed in France and had been introduced into England in the late 1800s. The Decadents believed that beauty should be valued above all else. Believing in "art for art's sake," the Decadents shunned the social problem novels that flourished earlier in the Victorian period. As Oscar Wilde wrote in his famous preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style." In other words, Wilde thought that moral judgments devalued the artistry of paintings and literature. Most Decadents also deviated from the moral values of their time period, experimenting with sex and drugs. Critics have noted that in "The Canterville Ghost" Sir Simon exhibits Decadent sensibilities.

## Science

In "The Canterville Ghost," Mr. Horace B. Otis declares that "the laws of Nature are not going to be suspended for the British aristocracy." The nineteenth century saw many advances in science. Charles Darwin had presented his theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The opening of the Natural History Museum in London in 1881 allowed for the greater spread of recent scientific knowledge. Advances were made in medicine, as vaccines were found for such diseases as rabies and anthrax. Scientists were better able to interpret the natural world as they discovered the size of atoms and the physical makeup of the sun. Also, in 1882, Viennese physician Joseph Breuer began using hypnosis to cure hysteria, marking the early beginnings of modern psychoanalysis.

Many nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans also sought answers in the more questionable sciences that flourished in their day. Phrenology, the belief that a person's character traits are apparent in the shape of his or her skull, is one example of a Victorian pseudo-science. Some Victorians also believed in Mesmerism, developed earlier in the century by Franz Anton Mesmer. He suggested the possibility of mind control through hypnosis. The Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882 to prove the existence of ghosts. Oscar Wilde refers to this society in "The Canterville Ghost." Mrs. Otis, a rational American, announces her intention of joining the society. The Otises' inability to distinguish between science and pseudo-science parodies Victorian faith in science.

# Critical Overview

Even before the scandal of Wilde's trial for homosexuality and subsequent imprisonment (1895-1897), critics had a difficult time separating Wilde's life from his works. Indeed, Wilde's credo of "life for art's sake," or sometimes "art for art's sake," encouraged the comparison. Proponents of this school of thought believed that the creation of beauty is the moral purpose for both life and art. The French author Andre Gide believed that Wilde achieved artistic greatness through his life rather than his literary achievements. James Joyce, the renowned Irish novelist, saw little to appreciate in Wilde's literature, but nonetheless saw him as a martyr to art. More recently, critics have come to appreciate the merits of Wilde's stories. Many suggest that Wilde reinvented and interpreted his life through his works. Philip Cohen, in his book *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, views Wilde's life in the 1880s reflected in "The Canterville Ghost." First, Cohen notes the coincidence of dates: "The Canterville Ghost" is set in 1884, the year Wilde married, and three hundred years after Sir Simon murdered his wife. This "correspondence of dates" marks the story as "the transformation of life into confessional art."

Cohen argues that here, as in many of his stories, Wilde "depicts a radical discrepancy between the self-or, more accurately, selves-he paraded before the public, on the one hand, and his private self, on the other." Like the Ghost, Cohen argues, Wilde suffers beneath a mask-like exterior. Wilde was hiding a homosexual relationship from public view. The Ghost, allowed to rest at the end of the story, finds forgiveness where Wilde cannot. Cohen views the trencher and ewer placed just outside the skeleton's reach as evocative of the Eucharist. Christian salvation for sin was denied Sir Simon for many years, and Wilde is likewise denied as long as he wears a mask.

Lydia Reineck Wilburn has more recently argued that the stories collected in *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories*, and in particular "The Canterville Ghost," should be read for more than just their moral dimensions. She shows how Wilde grapples with the idea and role of the audience in these stories-ideas he also explored in his essays. Wilde, Wilburn notes, "presents at least three contradictory stances about performance: that the audience should be ignored by the artist during the creation of his artwork, that the audience's participation in the aesthetic experience is limited to being receptive to and molded by the artist's work, and that the audience plays a major role in bringing about the aesthetic experience."

Thus, Wilburn asserts, "The Canterville Ghost" is primarily about the nature of performance. The reader should recognize the Ghost as an actor struggling, for the first time, against an unresponsive audience. The Otis family, Wilburn suggests, performs more successfully. The twins, after all, easily frighten Sir Simon with their fabricated ghost. Also, Wilburn sees more sophistication in what earlier critics may have called derivative. As Rodney Shewan argues, Wilde plays with the conventions of other genres: ghost stories, fairy tales, Gothic novels. He expects his readers to understand these references. The housekeeper, for instance, should be readily identifiable as a figure pulled from a Gothic novel. This, Wilburn argues, foregrounds the "fiction-making"

of the story. However, Wilde's reliance on these references also makes him rely on his reading audience, much as the Ghost relied on the Otises. Without an appreciative audience, the performance will fail.

A century after Wilde's trial for homosexuality, critics no longer judge his works on the basis of the morality of his personal life. However, the critics do take into account the events of his life and their influence on his work. Therefore, much is made of masks and performance in all of his literature, and "The Canterville Ghost" is no exception. Where once critics wrote it off as too frivolous and light for serious consideration, they now focus on the dark side of Wilde's comedy.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Lutz is currently teaching writing at the New York University School of Continuing Education. In the following essay, she examines the importance of masks and performances in "The Canterville Ghost."*

Many critics of Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" find dark and profound meanings beneath what Philip K. Cohen calls in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* "the camouflage of hilarity." Cohen argues that this seemingly light ghost story "faithfully renders Wilde's life during the mid 1880s," a time when Wilde, by necessity was leading a double life. By 1886, he was involved in a homosexual relationship with Robert Ross and had also been married for two years. Both his marriage and the social mores of late Victorian England demanded that Wilde hide his affair.

In "The Canterville Ghost," Cohen finds Wilde almost confessional, condemning the wearing of masks and the "radical discrepancy between the self-or, more accurately, selves-he paraded before the public . . . and his private self." Lydia Reinbeck Wilburn in "Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost': The Power of an Audience," reads the story as a reflection of Wilde's aesthetic vision, if not his moral vision. Wilburn sees Wilde grappling with questions about the function of audience. How important is the audience to an artist? How important should an audience be? Wilburn notes that Wilde addressed similar issues in his essays and criticism. However, in "The Canterville Ghost," she finds Wilde more receptive than he was in his critical works to the idea that an artist needs an appreciative audience to successfully perform. Though Wilburn and Cohen reach different conclusions in their studies, both fundamentally see "The Canterville Ghost" as an essay on performance and mask-wearing, and both extract a serious interpretation from the work.

That "The Canterville Ghost" is about masks and performance is easy to concede. The Ghost, Sir Simon, studies the art of haunting. He constantly prepares for his role as a ghost. The narrator shows him reflecting upon his past successes when first rebuffed by the Otis family: "With the enthusiastic egotism of the true artist he went over his most celebrated performances, and smiled bitterly to himself as he recalled to mind his last appearance as the 'Red Reuben, or the Strangled Babe,' his *debut* as 'Gaunt Gideon, the Blood-sucker of Bexley Moor,' and the *furore* he had excited one lovely June evening by merely playing ninepins with his own bones upon the lawn-tennis ground."

Sir Simon uses a theatrical vocabulary to describe his past roles. "Debut" and "furore" indicate both his performance and the audience for whom he plays. Actors debut new roles to audiences, and a furore is caused when a play is a smash hit. Even when not performing, the Ghost exhibits the stereotypical affectations of actors and dandies- men who gave exaggerated attention to their appearance. Sir Simon has created a dandyism for ghosts. This is not unlike Oscar Wilde who, adorned in velvet breeches and with a green carnation in his buttonhole presented himself as a brilliant dandy to London society. Similarly, the narrative emphasizes Sir Simon's attention to clothes: "He was simply but neatly clad in a long shroud, spotted with churchyard mould." Sir Simon pays

as much attention to his gruesome attire as any dandy. Indeed, it can take the Ghost up to three hours to don an appropriate costume.

Despite the Ghost's dedication to his role, the American Otis family proves a most unreceptive audience. When the Ghost rattles his chains, Mr. Horace B. Otis suggests that Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator would stop the clanking. When the Ghost effects "his celebrated peal of demoniac laughter," Mrs. Otis offers Dr. Dobell's tincture as a cure for indigestion. Disgusted by the "gross materialism" of the Otises, Sir Simon eventually abandons his art and holes himself up in a secret room. The Ghost views his failure to scare the Otises as tragedy, and Wilburn and Cohen use his failure as a jumping off point in their criticism.

However, the comic tone of the story belies any attempt to read pathos into the Ghost's self-pity. "The Canterville Ghost" parodies actors, dandies, American materialism, aristocratic excess, ghost stories, and Gothic conventions. From the outset, the story is comic, and it disarms readers by its apparent lightness. Dialogue in "The Canterville Ghost" foreshadows the witty nonsense spoken in Wilde's later plays. Each member of the Otis family is summed up in a witty characterization that marks him or her as the subject of comedy rather than tragedy. Of Mrs. Otis, formerly Miss Lucretia R. Tappen of New York, we learn "in many respects, she was quite English, and was an excellent example of the fact that we have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language." Of the eldest son, Washington, we are told, "Gardenias and the peerage were his only weaknesses. Otherwise he was extremely sensible."

Both descriptions point to a comic theme thoroughly exploited in "The Canterville Ghost": the farcical result of the American/British culture clash. Americans in England were ridiculed for their atro- cious slang and peculiar accents, a point noted in the story when the Otises, with stereotypical American assumed superiority, expound on "the sweetness of the New York accent as compared to the London drawl." Likewise, despite their protestations in favor of democracy, Americans were perceived to be envious of the English aristocracy. Therefore, at the end of the tale, Virginia Otis "received the coronet," or married the Duke, which as the narrator explains, "is the reward for all good little American girls."

The story begins and ends by parodying stock characters. Comic moment succeeds comic moment throughout the narrative. Given this, how is the reader to treat a ghost story seriously when the Ghost is not taken seriously by the characters he attempts to haunt, and the characters are merely sketched stereotypes?

Perhaps, as Wilburn argues, the reader needs to accept that each character in "The Canterville Ghost" acts a part. The Ghost may be the only character who meditates upon performance, but surely Mrs. Otis who once played a "celebrated New York belle" and now trades on "her superb profile," also stays in costume throughout the story. Mrs. Otis, however, has realized that one cannot play the same role forever, and like an accomplished actress moves gracefully from girlish ingenue to mature character parts. Sir Simon's failure springs from a point that Wilde would later return to in his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. First, Sir Simon is jolted into reality when the Otises fail to

respond correctly to his haunting. Up until this point there has been no difference between the Ghost's public and private selves. Sir Simon, before the Otises arrived, truly lived by Oscar Wilde's motto: "Life for art's sake." Sir Simon, in other words, had no identity other than that of evil ghost.

Like the Ghost, Sybil Vane, the beautiful actress in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* realizes that she has no identity beyond her nightly performances. In this dark and disturbing novel, this realization causes Sybil to commit suicide. Initially, the title character, Dorian Gray, falls in love with Sybil because she is a wonderful actress. Each night she plays a different heroine in a Shakespeare play. Dorian can believe that she is actually Juliet or Desdemona even though she acts in a filthy theater with bad actors. When Sybil realizes, however, that she is not a Shakespearean heroine, but an actress in a cheap playhouse, she loses her ability to act. Dorian cannot love the real Sybil, only the ideal she represented in her roles. Similarly the Ghost can exist solely as a performer of a part. Once his public refuses to believe in his part, the Ghost loses his identity.

The nature of performance is an important theme in Oscar Wilde's works, but the theme does not necessarily lead to serious reflection. While Sybil Vane's suicide must be read as a tragedy, that Sir Simon gives up haunting to seek a final resting place can be interpreted differently. First, the Ghost's performance has had a good run. A Broadway play that lasted three hundred years would be considered a success indeed. Also, the other characters in "The Canterville Ghost" show every indication of keeping up their own performances. The Otis family embrace their character roles, and play out the American stereotypes to their fullest. If they inhabit a world where everyone performs a role, at least Wilde has created a rich variety of parts. Death, in the story, is a picturesque garden that awaits the exhausted actor. The specter of Oscar Wilde and his real life tragedy haunts much interpretation of "The Canterville Ghost," but here, Wilde created a comedy.

**Source:** Kimberly Lutz, "Serious Comedy? Finding Meaning in 'The Canterville Ghost,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*Wilburn is a professor of English at Pepperdine University. In the following essay, she examines Wilde's exploration of the role of the audience in "The Canterville Ghost," focusing on Virginia as an audience for the ghost.*

Although Wilde's short story collection *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* has enjoyed some critical attention, most of the discussion has focused on the comic and moral content of the stories, especially the relationship between the criminal and the artist. But a closer examination of the stories suggests that Wilde was also exploring various concepts of a theory of performance-specifi- cally the artist's and audience's roles in the artistic performance. Wilde was using the texts, particularly "The Canterville Ghost," to work through problems involving the audience's power over different phases of the artist's performance.

In his works Wilde presents at least three contradictory stances about performance: that the audience should be ignored by the artist during creation of the artwork, that the audience's participation in the aesthetic experience is limited to being receptive to and molded by the artist's work, and that the audience plays a major role in bringing about the aesthetic experience. These contradictions are either stated outright in his essays and letters, or they are implied or presented in his stories. In *Intentions* and numerous other reviews and letters to editors, Wilde strenuously resisted the notion that the audience could have an active role in what Wolfgang Iser [in *The Implied Reader*, 1975] calls the aesthetic experience, that moment brought about by the "convergence of text and reader." Wilde, with his classical education and Paterian tastes, thought that the artist should stand aloof from the audience's preconceptions about art; as artist, his role was to perform, thereby delivering aesthetic dictates to his audience and shaping their notions and tastes. But running counter to his stated directives was the fact that by nature he was very much a public performer, one who depended on the interaction between artist, audience, and artwork. Wilde needed his audience if he were to create, a lesson he learned late but well when, imprisoned, he was deprived of the audience he sought. And his early stories (although minor works) show the public to be crucial to the making of illusion and even to the artist's well-being. This [essay] will focus on "The Canterville Ghost," not only because it has always been one of Wilde's most popular early stories (so popular that it has been produced recently as a television movie), but, more importantly, because it is one whose subtext undercuts Wilde's stated critical positions.

The conflicting notions of the audience's role preoccupied Wilde throughout his career, and they have preoccupied his critics, who continue to search for a resolution to these contradictions. Recent studies of Wilde's work, however, have begun to point out ways in which some of his fictional and dramatic works embody and advance the various tenets of his critical thought. But as yet critics have not accounted adequately for the diversity of his critical stances, nor have they established a connection between his early concern with performance on the one hand and his continuing distrust of the audience's role in the aesthetic experience on the other. Richard Poirier's *The*

*Performing Self* presents a conception of literature which accounts for these complexities. Poirier here puts forward a theory of performance focusing on the local energy of the writing effort and effect rather than on a coherent canon of works. Poirier describes literature as a performance of the self, a playful activity, a solitary "self-discovering, self-watching response" to the chaos of existence. For the artist, the selfdiscovery in creation produces a feeling of "narcissistic power" as he momentarily gains control of his environment. During this first aspect of the creating act the most exciting considerations for the artist are himself and the rarefied, self-absorbed atmosphere of the performance. Poirier adds, however, that after this phase, another self emerges from the completed performance, a public self that looks outward to audiences for publicity, for confirmation of the creative act, or even for "historical dimension." The artist's creative energies, now in the public sphere, strive for "love" from the public and "compet[e] with reality itself for control of the minds exposed" to the artwork.

Poirier's two-phase analysis of creative acts allows us to see that through his contradictions Wilde was trying to talk about different aspects of performance. Thus, when Wilde states in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" that an artist takes no notice of the public, he means this to describe the self-consulting, self-discovering phase of the creative act. And the contradictory statement in the same essay that the artist is to shape the public's taste and temperament refers to the second phase of the performance: thus the artist now wants to affect what T. S. Eliot would call the literary tradition.

Later, when Wilde pushes these notions further, examining the audience as co-shapers of the aesthetic experience, we recognize that Wilde foreshadows Iser's concerns as well as other modern theories. In his fiction Wilde anticipates Victor Shklovsky's notions of laying bare the devices of fiction by pointing to the audience's and artist's roles as makers [in *Russian Formalism*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 1965]. In many of these stories Wilde self-consciously displays the human attempt to use form so as to structure fiction and reality, suggesting Donald Woods Winnicott's concepts of creativity and play in his collection *Playing and Reality*. Winnicott demonstrates that the healthy individual, from infancy, engages in continual interplay in the "potential space" between himself and the outside world, both to separate himself from it and to establish an interrelationship with it. Wilde's story "The Canterville Ghost" presents an example of such ongoing creativity as the characters create other fictional characters or objects: the twins recreate the Canterville Ghost out of advertising slogans, they create their own "Otis Ghoste," and Virginia "comes to life" for readers because Wilde encourages us to help create her from the plethora of previously written fictions and myths inhabiting the text. Thus writer, audience, and text all join in the creation of the story.

When readers first encounter Wilde's short stories, their frivolous and somewhat risque content seems to show Wilde as minimally concerned about the reader's power in the aesthetic experience. Nor does he seem interested in shaping the reader's tastes, aesthetic judgment, or world view. Yet a closer examination of the underlying concerns of the works points to a different understanding of these stories. Each of the stories in the collection *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* depicts an artist-figure

grappling with his or her role in relation to the audience. In two of the stories, *"Lord Arthur Savile's Crime"* and "The Model Millionaire," Wilde portrays the artist blithely creating or enacting roles without the necessity of the audience's complicity. But in the other two stories, "The Canterville Ghost" and "The Sphinx Without a Secret," the audience is shown to be crucial to the making of the illusions and to the artist's selfsatisfaction. Although all four stories focus on the creating self, only "The Canterville Ghost" concerns us here, for this story alone explores Wilde's multiple interests in the artist and the audience as creators.

In this story, a *nouveau-riche* American family, the Otises, moves to England and searches for an old English mansion to buy. But they choose a home that is haunted by a murderer's ghost-the original tenant, Sir Simon de Canterville. Unlike their English neighbors, the upstart Americans refuse to take the Ghost seriously; instead, they satirize and parody his stunts and horrors. This response eventually depresses the Canterville Ghost. He tries to find other ways to affect them, even to the point of compromising his art. Yet, he is unwilling to quit his occupation altogether, for he is a responsible being. We soon discover, however, that he cannot leave even if he wants to until someone comes to release his soul from the earthly plane into the final resting place. Virginia, the only daughter of the Otises, takes on that role, befriending and thereby releasing him. In gratitude, the Ghost presents her with the Canterville jewels. Thereafter she marries a young neighboring Duke, and they settle into happy domesticity.

Wilde published "The Canterville Ghost" along with three other stories, in book form in July 1891, but they had each been published in sophisticated society journals four years earlier. "The Canterville Ghost-A Hylo-Idealistic Romance: The Redemptive Heroine" was the first to appear, published in the 3 February and 2 March 1887 issues of *Court and Society Review* (a short-lived journal catering to the sophisticated tastes and leisured interests of the upper classes). Ghost stories were very much in demand throughout the nineteenth century, in part because of the influence of the Gothic novel and because of the resurgence of interest in paranormal occurrences (as evidenced by the establishment of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882). In *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, for example, where Wilde was to publish "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (July 1889), ghost stories were part of the monthly fare, whether written as real attempts at horror, investigations into the supernatural, or comedies about ghosts. Similarly, ghosts are of concern to characters in major fiction of the nineteenth century such as *Northanger Abbey, Wuthering Heights* and "The Turn of the Screw." Thus, Wilde could count on seasoned audiences for "The Canterville Ghost." Given a receptive audience, he tries through the subtext to enlarge their awareness about fiction-making and about the arbitrary reality created by language.

In the beginning of "The Canterville Ghost" Wilde focuses on performance by pointing both to the first (narcissistic) and second (public) phases of the Ghost's creations. The Canterville Ghost glories in his artistry, taking every opportunity to provoke fresh terror in the new residents in the mansion, and he recalls his most celebrated performances with "the enthusiastic egotism of the true artist." His performances are elaborate, theatricalized with costumes and alliterative titles such as "Red Ruben, or the Strangled

Babe," "Gaunt Gibeon, or the Blood- Sucker of Bexley Moor," and "Martin the Maniac, or the Masked Mystery." The humorous alliteration draws attention to the artificiality of ghost stories as well as to the Ghost as conscious fiction-maker.

But almost immediately Wilde introduces the problem most artists must contend with when performing: an unreceptive audience that prevents the performance from reaching completion. Such is the American family-a pragmatic, mundane group who simply refuse to be terrorized, rendering the Ghost's artistic efforts ineffectual. Confronted with the Ghosts's various attempts to horrify, the boys treat the performer like a mere schoolboy opponent, hurling pillows and water balloons at him, and even spitting pellets from peashooters at him. His performances having failed with the twins, the Ghost hopes to gain proper publicity from the adults, by perhaps precipitating screaming fits, fainting spells, or possibly heart attacks from them, but they give him only what they would an ordinary mortal displaying such behavior-Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator for his noisy chains and Dr. Dobell's tincture for his "indigestion." And despite the Ghost's laudable attempts to provide them a terrifying bloodstain every night, Washington prosaically scrubs it away with Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent. Such pragmatic responses to the Ghost's horrific performances convince him that his audience does not deserve the bloodstain: they are, he sniffs, clearly incapable of appreciating the "symbolic value of sensuous phenomena."

The Ghost refuses to admit to himself that his audience will never engage in his performances, and he gives them one more chance. He prepares his most terrible deed to date: to gibber and moan horrifically while stabbing himself repeatedly through the neck. On his way to do this he pauses at the corner, only to receive a terrible shock. The twins have upstaged his performance, creating an apparition of their own, seemingly a parody of a ghost. The poor Canterville Ghost is "frightened witless," and "never having seen a ghost before" he retreats hastily. Naturally, the humor of this passage comes from seeing a ghost being frightened by a ghost. But Wilde also seems to be wrestling here with the role of the audience in the creating process. We see in this scene that the artistic ghost, unlike the twins when they were the audience, responds receptively to their performance, as an audience should; he suspends his disbelief and follows their aesthetic suggestions. For example, when he cannot actually make out what the scroll proclaims, the Ghost creates the statement himself: it must, he assumes, present "some scroll of shame," "some record of wild sins," "some awful calendar of crime." Not until the dawn will he be able to see that he owes his fright more to his own imagination than to the concrete details-the turnips and cloth- of the twins's artifact. His previous response was thus an aesthetic experience resulting from his collusion with the artistry of the twins, whereas their creative intention seemed to be mainly mockery. When the Ghost can read the scroll's actual message, he realizes the twins' satiric and insulting intent:

YE OTIS GHOSTE
Ye Onlie True and Originale Spook.
Beware of Ye Imitations
All others are Counterfeite.

Thus has his audience (now the artists) transformed his centuries of horrific productions to the ephemeral palaver of American advertisements. Worst of all, the scroll pronounces the Canterville Ghost's artistry counterfeit and imitative. Demoralized, he now inhabits their fiction-that he simply was not capable of terrorizing his audience as the "Onlie True and Originale Spook" could do so well.

It is certainly true that he was not able to involve them in his artistry as they were able to involve him. But we see that the Canterville Ghost is a more receptive audience than were the twins: unlike them, he is open to many different kinds of artistic experience. We also see that the twins are not as philistine as the Ghost would have us think, for they are themselves capable of creating, even if only slapstick, buffoonery, or satire. Unfortunately though, their narrow artistic interests do not include the Ghost's particular creations; they simply refuse to take them seriously. Wilde, in his career, would struggle with this same plight: how to get audiences to hear his works, how to keep them from ridiculing or dismissing him.

In despair, the Canterville Ghost draws on his last reservoir of discourse to conjure up a revenge. Desperately, he tries his most deadly invocation and awaits the second crowing of the cock: "When Chanticleer had sounded twice his merry horn, deeds of blood would be wrought, and Murder [would] walk abroad with silent feet." But again, his art-the ability to evoke the power residing within words-fails him: apparently for the first time in the history of conjuring, Chanticleer crows only once. Frustrated, humiliated, and at last cowed, the Canterville Ghost sinks into a dark depression.

His expectations undermined by the audience's lack of interest, the Ghost realizes (as Wilde himself eventually would) that he must reconsider his roles, search for new masks, and renovate his performances. Through the manipulation of objects and language, the young Americans have evoked a potential space where the Ghost must define himself anew, but the only role left him is that of Victorian duty or convention. Even though the Americans have hurt his feelings, he dutifully and politely "traverse[s] the corridor" every Saturday between midnight and three o'clock, now having oiled his chains and removed his noisy boots, "to take every possible precaution against being either heard or seen." In other words, by wrongly trying to please his audience, by giving in to their expectations, the Ghost has let the audience take over his future performances: they have told him he can perform, but only without demanding their attention. The Americans thus not only refuse to participate in his public performance but now they also dictate to him how to structure his private first phase of creation: so long as he eliminates everything from his performance which might attract their attention, he can dress up as "Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods" or however he desires. If they are not asked to respond to his performances, they will not have to grapple with their preconceptions about his performances-or about reality. Rather, they can continue with their own philistine assumptions, namely that ghosts (or artists) are to be ignored or harassed, but not to be taken seriously (thus the twins tie strings across the corridors to trip him and make a butter-slide from the top of the oak staircase to the opening of the Tapestry Chamber, the last of which causes the Ghost a severe fall). Clearly they are exactly the kind of audience any artist of Wilde's cast fears.

But even if Wilde's ghostly alter-ego has surrendered control of his art to his audience, Wilde has not. His wit, inverted cliches and paradox draw attention to himself and the audience as performers in life and art. His rhetorical devices show us how to lay bare the arbitrary acceptance of the reality created by language, categories, and assumptions of the age. As in "Critic as Artist" Wilde shows us how we are "slaves of words." Through the humor ous paradox that the ghost of a murderer would remain polite and dutiful in other areas of his existence, Wilde places the notions of duty, sincerity, and sin into the realm of play. Further, Wilde succeeds in upending conventional notions of good and evil when he elicits from the reader some sympathy for the Ghost who had committed a crime but who now is responsible, concerned for others, and polite. Delighting in paradox, Wilde playfully manipulates our point of view until the attentive reader can question the stability of words such as "evil," "earnest," "sin," or "responsibility." By thus pointing to the artificiality of language, Wilde again makes his audience aware of themselves as performers of the reality around them.

In addition, Wilde playfully calls our attention to our assumptions about language and moral categories in the scenes with Virginia and the Canterville ghost. When Virginia, a "sweet Puritan," scolds him for murdering his wife, the Ghost, a complex "personality" like the murderer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (treated in Wilde's "Pen, Pencil, and Poison"), responds aptly and wittily, transforming ethical concerns into aesthetic concerns. In a display of panache, the Ghost tells Virginia that he murdered his wife primarily in aesthetic defense against her ordinary face, her negligent housekeeping habits, and her unimaginative cookery:
"It is very wrong to kill anyone," said Virginia, who at times had a sweet Puritan gravity, caught from some Old New England ancestor."Oh, I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery. Why, there was a buck I had shot in Hogley Woods, a magnificent pricket, and do you know how she had it sent up to table? However, it is no matter now, for it is all over, and I don't think it was very nice of her brothers to starve me to death, though I did kill her".

Wilde orchestrates this scene with such whimsical irony that any indignation or outrage the reader might feel at such monstrous behavior is absolutely undercut. Only for a moment at the end of the story does Virginia, the Ghost's new audience (and now his new biographer), succeed in evoking for us any sense of real pain, sin, or remorse felt by the Ghost, when she points out Sir Simon's manacled skeleton, showing that he died in agony, vainly reaching towards food and drink placed just out of his reach. Of course Wilde's reader soon recognizes this description as a Gothic cliche, after which he or she rescinds any emotional investment in the Ghost's predicament. The fluid stances Wilde uses to describe Sir Simon's life allows him to call our attention to other arbitrary structures upon which we base our judgments. And if the modern reader knows (just as a limited number knew then) that when this story was published Wilde himself had begun to violate society's sexual codes, then the reader can bring Wilde's own "crime" to the story's appeal for flexible judgments about morality.

Of course, Wilde's main concern with any character's sins or indiscretions is whether the behavior results in an enlarged, multiplied (Paterian) self. Those personalities who explore new arenas of experience, and thus perform new facets of the self, are seen as artists, whether of life or artifact. In this story Wilde celebrates characters who have tried on other masks in life (or in death). The ghost of course is one such character, as is Mrs. Lucretia Tappan Otis, who has played the roles of "celebrated New York belle" in the past and is currently playing a handsome matron with a "superb profile." But whereas Mrs. Otis has only dabbled in the artistry of the self, her daughter Virginia will wholeheartedly engage in such artistry. By risking her chaste reputation in order to embark on a secret, romantic escapade (an activity which, when camouflaged with the excuse that one is visiting a sick relative, Wilde later would term "bunburying" in *The Importance of Being Earnest*), Virginia recreates the self, paralleling Wilde's other artist/criminal figures. After this romantic rite of passage, Virginia becomes an artist of the self. But unlike the ghost, she successfully dictates artistic terms to her audiences within the story, whether to her husband and family or to the ghost himself. They receive or contribute to her performances as she desires: her family accepts her version of reality while she was with the ghost, and because of her love the ghost allows her to remake his gothic drama of revenge and depression into a tragicomedy of forgiveness and peace. Possibly, her dominant position in relation to her audience is meant to suggest Wilde's desires regarding his own role with his audiences.

We watch Virginia's character take on more masks and become an aggregate of performances as the story progresses. Originally we see her as a fifteen-year-old "amazon," "lithe and lovely as a fawn," whose freshness provides a contrast to the aesthetic, amoral ghost. Her essential naivete is suggested when she sweetly offers the ghost a sandwich and has the imaginative capacity to believe in him before the others do: as the story's subtitle indicates, she is the "hylo-idealist" of this "romance." Soon, however, the reader realizes that Wilde's text provides potential space for the reader to negotiate Virginia's characterization through the echoes of previous texts inhabiting this text. Virginia's name, for example, emphasizes that she will be a conciliator between the English families and her own; "Virginia" recalls both the English Queen and the American state named for that queen. Nor is it an accident that the only other woman besides Virginia that the ghost admires is the Virgin Queen (he mentions that she had complimented his performance at the Kenilworth tournament). In addition, the description of Virginia as an amazon suggests a tie to the mythic world, just as the second part of the subtitle ("The Redemptive Heroine") opens up possibilities for ties to other literary heroines and even to the Virgin Mary. When we consider Virginia's role in the story-she leads the Ghost through the darkness so that his soul may find final rest-there is also a clear echo of Dante's Beatrice. And, just as Beatrice rebuked Dante when he reached the top of Purgatory, so Virginia sternly reminds the Ghost that it is "very wrong to kill anyone," and later she chastises him for being rude, dishonest, "horrid, and vulgar." Virginia/Beatrice even usurps Dante's role when she returns to the others with her new vision. Thus we see Wilde using familiar literary models to encourage his audience to respond creatively to the story; his text calls attention to our own roles as receptive readers (and therefore creators) who can fill the gaps in the text, a possibility which Wilde in "Critic as Artist" seems to support for the critic or for any sensitive, educated reader: "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he

criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought . . . . Indeed, I would call criticism a creation." Yet Wilde seems ambivalent about a reader's being too free with a text. His confident statement about the creative critic or reader contrasts markedly with Wilde's anxious Canterville Ghost, whose audiences ignore his artistic guidance and eventually force him to relinquish control of his art. Wilde in this story wants to shape the audiences's responses more than he implied in "Critic as Artist."

One area, however, where Wilde's shaping hand is perhaps too subtle for many readers is that of Virginia's bunburying. Wilde handles the sexual goings-on between the ghost and Virginia so discreetly that they have remained hidden from the audiences within the story as well as from most readers of the story. The energy of the story focuses on the performance of concealment, yet Wilde also enjoys the game of implying that there is something to reveal. First, we recall that Virginia is seduced by the Canterville Ghost's "dreamy voice" and his poetically persuasive rhetoric. But beneath this artist's smooth words of poesy is found another familiar line, used by countless men to seduce countless virgins-that a good woman's love can redeem a man's crooked soul. The ghost points to the inscription on the library window (quoted below) and promises Virginia that he wants her only to pray and weep for him and thereby release his soul. But even a cursory glance at the prophecy on the library window shows that the ghost is withholding something in his interpretation of these lines. Readers who know Wilde's works remember his later statement in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that the soul can be cured by means of the senses, and there are certainly numerous sensuous details in this scene.

In the context of what follows between Virginia and the ghost, the inscription can suggest that the ghost looks forward to sexual fulfillment and consequent gratitude ("When a golden girl can win Prayer from out of the lips of sin"), and there is the hint of a rite of passage for the golden girl ("And a little child gives away its tears"). Virginia is fifteen, and possibly Wilde is suggesting the familiar relationship between an older artist and a younger lover. Several other details in the text also suggest a sexual seduction. When the ghost gratefully kisses Virginia's hand, his hands are "cold as ice," but his lips are burning "like fire," a description which underlines his sensual nature. Further, the ghost clutches her hand tightly, and Virginia goes with him into the darkness, despite the warnings from the gargoyles (symbols of human lusts) and from the huntsmen on the tapestry (an image suggesting that Virginia is the prey). As they reach the threshold of the "great black cavern" he "pull[s] at her dress" to hasten her in.

And there is other evidence to suggest that Virginia has indeed been bunburying. When Virginia returns after being alone with the ghost for eight hours she brings with her a casket of jewels (a gift usually presented to a lover). Later, she is given the widow's place in Sir Simon's funeral procession. Such precedence reinforces the idea that probably she was not just praying and weeping during that entire eight hours. Years later, when queried by Cecil (who is by that time her husband) she will not give details about her visit with the ghost, saying only that she owes Sir Simon "a great deal" because he taught her to see "what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both." The Duke seems satisfied enough with this answer as long as her

heart is his, though her explanation sounds suspiciously like an excuse used by a bunburyist. This interpretation finds further support when Virginia, by then a respectable matron, blushes at the thought of telling her children about her activities. Rodney Shewan calls this conclusion "the feminist's answer to '*Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*,'" for in this case the wife, not the husband, has "sacrificed" herself and kept the secret from her spouse. Such poetic justice no doubt would be much appreciated by the fashionable (and perhaps jaded) readers of *Court and Society Review*. But taking Shewan's observation further, we can also see that the importance of this scene for Wilde is that Virginia has added to the aggregate of her self. She has transformed herself from a one-dimensional cliche to a multi-faceted romance. She has become an artist of the self.

By the end of the story we begin to synthesize Wilde's contrapuntal concerns about performance. Not only do the characters, plot, and language explore the nature of performance, but the story's structures play with it as well when they elude easy categorization. The spoof of a ghost story slides into erotic intrigue, and the young Duke's idyllic love story with Virginia plays with elements of Old Comedy as she bunburies with an older man. The marriage of the Duke and Virginia reconciles the old world with the new, and Virginia, now a Duchess, proudly wears the Canterville jewels. Further, the Duke is able to live with his wife's unwillingness to share her secret, trusting her to love him in spite of the unexplained event in her past. Even though the story ends on a question (whether she will tell her children her secret), readers feel the ending provides closure: Virginia has been so successful in her life's artistry thus far that we are confident she will create an appropriate fiction about her secret for her children when the time comes.

Wilde further reminds readers of his notions about creativity when the ghost of Sir Simon, because of the intercession of Virginia (his artistic audience), receives forgiveness and love from her, which, as Poirier points out, is at bottom what every personality and artist strives to achieve when presenting a performance to the public. Sadly, though, he now desires that Virginia's love serve only to grant him deliverance to his final death. Perhaps the ghost's achievement of final rest suggests that last aspect of the creative process which every artist experiences-the depletion and emptiness following the completion of any artwork. Or perhaps the ghost's desire to attain final rest suggests his recognition that the mode of performance he loved so much (horrifying the inhabitants of the mansion) no longer has a receptive audience, and thus there is no point in going on with it. This possibility would be a dark one for Wilde since, like the ghost, he too devotes much of his creative energy to shocking (and sometimes horrifying) his audiences.

This last observation leads us back to one of Wilde's anxieties about performance which is not fully resolved in the story-namely the role of the artist in relation to the audience and the work. For beneath the comic tone and paradoxical style of the story, we sense the Ghost's earnestness about his artistry and his genuine despair over his failure to reach his audience on his own terms. Perhaps comedy and paradox are Wilde's defenses against the real pathos an artist feels when his performance is not given even polite consideration by the audience.

The Canterville Ghost tries several roles in his increasingly desperate attempt to achieve-at the least-confirmation from his audience so that he can know that public aspect of the performing self. But he is able to do so only when he becomes respectable, dutiful, and self-effacing-a grim alternative for any artist, but especially one of Wilde's cast. Perhaps the ghost's last fling with Virginia was Wilde's way of retrieving for his alter-ego some bit of liveliness, complexity, and personality to compensate for his necessary surrender to the audience.

Such was the way Wilde handled rejection from his audience in his own works and life (until his imprisonment): he simply became more flamboyant and more subversive as he put off confronting the significant power of his audience. A main problem, then, that the reader must negotiate in Wilde's work is the same contradiction that threatened to undo his life: Wilde wants to prevent his audience from controlling his creative territory, but he also wants to encourage the audience in its responsibility to create its reality and fiction. Thus, Wilde always kept one eye on his audience, seeking out their recognition, and, like the ghost, he tried several means to persuade them to consider his vision. Just as the ghost needed to tell someone his artistic woes, so Wilde expended much energy writing letters to journals such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *St. James Gazette*, the *Daily Chronicle, the Speaker*, and the *Daily Telegraph*, earnestly justifying the ways of his art to his public. Even his paradoxical style-although appreciated by persons such as the readers of *Court and Society Review*- was not only a means to shock his audience, but ultimately an attempt to persuade unbelievers to inhabit his world view, a view that language, values, and beliefs are arbitrary structures and that the artist's role is to guide the audience in its creations and structurings. Wilde wanted the success with his audiences that Virginia achieved with hers. So, in addition to writing letters to editors, he continued to explore and expose what he saw as the misguided power of audiences in his fiction and essays. The underlying text beneath the humor of the Ghost's defeat reveals to the readers that even though Wilde seemed in control of the witty and complex performance of "The Canterville Ghost," on some level he knew (but chose not to believe, as his later life would show) that the audience had the power to control or to ruin a performance-or even an artist. It is perhaps significant that when Wilde published these stories in book form for the general public, the collection received mostly bad reviews. Like the Canterville Ghost, Wilde would have to try yet another mask.

**Source:** Lydia Reineck Wilburn, "Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost': The Power of an Audience," in *Papers on Language & Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter, 1987, pp. 41-55.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Cohen examines numerous moral and religious dualities in "The Canterville Ghost."*

The main action of "The Canterville Ghost" takes place in 1884, three hundred years after Sir Simon murdered his wife-and in the same year that Wilde married his. Whereas Wilde suggests his personal guilt, augmented by the betrayal of marriage, within *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, here they are present only through the correspondence of dates. Yet the transformation of life into confessional art is no less certainly his intention. He constructs this story, like so many of his other works, around the confrontation of saint and sinner. The distinguishing characteristic of "The Canterville Ghost" is its negative portrayal of the double life. Although Wilde might praise artificiality and the wearing of masks elsewhere, the ghost's experience reveals that this mode of existence is the lonely refuge of an anguished sinner, who gladly forsakes it to gain the peace that forgiveness brings. Finally, as he promises in the subtitle, "A Hylo-Idealistic Romance," Wilde presents the conflict between materialism and idealism, an opposition he develops using the literary labels *realism* and *romance* in "The Decay of Lying." "The Canterville Ghost" constitutes also Wilde's tentative testing of the fairy-tale genre, in which he casts the next major portion of his writings.

"The Canterville Ghost" faithfully renders Wilde's life during the mid-1880s. Beneath the camouflage of hilarity, he depicts a radical discrepancy between the self-or, more accurately, selves- he paraded before the public, on the one hand, and his private self, on the other. The Canterville ghost, representing the first of these, has long practiced an art that Wilde himself mastered: "insincerity . . . by which we can multiply our personalities" through the wearing of masks. In a state of despair, the ghost looks back on past triumphs:

With the enthusiastic egotism of the true artist he went over his most celebrated performances, and smiled bitterly to himself as he recalled to mind his last appearance as "Red Ruben, or the Strangled Babe," his debut as "Gaunt Gibeon, the Blood-sucker of Bexley Moor," and the furore he had excited one lovely June evening by merely playing ninepins with his own bones upon the lawn-tennis ground.

Sir Simon's antics not only yield the desired self-multiplication, but also they afford the additional pleasure of shocking the public. Wilde reiterates the relationship of haunting to art as he conducts his reader behind the scenes:

It [i.e., the role of "Reckless Rupert"] was, however, an extremely difficult "make-up," if I may use such a theatrical expression in connection with one of the greatest mysteries of the supernatural, or, to employ a more scientific term, the higher-natural world, and it took him fully three hours to make his preparations.

The veteran thespian can boast a long list of hauntees gone mad as a result of his artistry. Although for most of his career he has been restricted to victimizing aristocrats

and their servants, the installation of the Otis family at Canterville Chase presents him with the opportunity *epater le bourgeois*. However, their materialistic mentality proves more than a match for even his best performances. Like the other arts, Sir Simon's languishes in an age dominated by science and common sense.

Wilde seems to be suggesting that creative energies might be directed toward more fruitful enterprises than the lost war against Philistinism. And certainly the story indicates that Sir Simon's efforts to transform his life, such as it is, into art yield no greater success than Dorian Gray's. Even had the age been more propitious, the poseur's existence could not have fulfilled the ghost-or Oscar Wilde. For, while the public figure has chosen society as victim, the private self has fallen prey to society. Sir Simon's defeat by an unappreciative audience is hilarious indeed when contrasted with the anguish of his inner being. As he tells Virginia, his wife's brothers murdered him nine years after he took her life. They committed that grim, vindictive act of revenge associated in *The Duchess of Padua* with Old Testament morality. Sir Simon's skeleton commemorates their vengeance and represents the man behind his and Wilde's masks:

Imbedded in the wall [of a secret compartment] was a huge iron ring, and chained to it was a gaunt skeleton, that was stretched out at full length on the stone floor, and seemed to be trying to grasp with its long fleshless fingers an old-fashioned trencher and ewer, that were placed just out of his reach. The jug had evidently been once filled with water, as it was covered inside with green mould. There was nothing on the trencher but a pile of dust.

In this symbolic tableau, the Old Testament judgment that irrevocably damns sexual inversion has punished Sir Simon for his crime and shackled Wilde with mind-forged manacles that place salvation beyond his reach. The trencher and ewer suggest the Eucharist and the Christian dispensation of forgiveness for sin. Wilde sought New Testament mercy, but his socially instilled belief in Old Testament judgment, combined with imperfect faith in Christ's law of love, rendered it inaccessible to him at this time. The manacled skeleton might serve as emblem to The Duchess of Padua, which figures forth the same paralyzing entrapment between two moralities.

It has been observed that most of Wilde's works end with a ceremonial unmasking. "The Canterville Ghost" is no exception. But, whereas in the comedies a past crime or indiscretion is exposed, Sir Simon's evil deed has long been a matter of public record. In this story, Wilde lifts the poseur's successful mask to reveal the sufferer beneath. Sir Simon has actually been destroyed by the public he seems to have terrorized so ably. Masks, then, are a way to hide the scars of guilt and to taunt society for its lacerating morality. Certainly multiplication of personalities does not result in the fulfillment Wilde claims for it in other writings. In "The Canterville Ghost" he focuses on the shortcomings of this mode of existence, which he will unequivocally reject in *De Profundis. In his review of Yeats's Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, Wilde offers a definition of ghosts that thoroughly applies to Sir Simon:

The ghosts live in a state intermediary between this world and the next. They are held there by some earthly longing or affection, or some duty unfulfilled, or anger against the living; they are those who are too good for hell, and too bad for heaven.

The Canterville ghost longs for release from his protean series of roles; they are to him a form of purgatory rather than a means of self-realization. As did Guido and Beatrice, he longs for death: "Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace." But he cannot gain deliverance through his own efforts because he lacks faith; this he sacrificed by killing his wife. Stripped of his masks, his stage glory brought to an end, he tells Virginia of his spiritual despair: "You must weep for me for my sins, because I have no tears, and pray with me for my soul, because I have no faith, and then, if you have always been sweet, and good, and gentle, the Angel of Death will have mercy on me. . . . against the purity of a little child the powers of Hell cannot prevail." These lines provide the interpretative context for the chained skeleton. Sir Simon's lack of faith cannot be readily overcome like the transitory doubts of Guido, Beatrice, and Lord Arthur Savile, though he wants to believe as badly as they.

In *The Duchess of Padua* Wilde presents his characteristic saint-sinner confrontation and preaches the efficacy of forgiveness; but the play's deepstructure undercuts his sermonizing. *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* depicts mock salvation through conversion to Philistinism. "The Canterville Ghost" incorporates the central confrontation of The Duchess and brings it to more optimistic issue. Although Sir Simon, like Guido and Beatrice, seeks salvation in death, Wilde expresses in the story an unqualified belief in the transformative powers of Christian love.

He casts the puritanical Virginia Otis as successor to Guido and predecessor of Lady Windermere, Hester Worsley, and Lady Chiltern. Initially, she categorically condemns Sir Simon's deed: "'It is very wrong to kill any one,' said Virginia, who at times had a sweet Puritan gravity, caught from some old New England ancestor." The ghost counters with a rejection of her moral standards: "Oh, I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery." His first sentence deserves further consideration. But, rather than developing the argument, Wilde sounds a comic retreat. The debate soon gives way to Sir Simon's confession of despair and plea for Virginia's help.

Virginia's silent sacrifice of her paints separates her from the rest of her family and, in a sense, makes her, too, suffer art's defeat by Philistinism. But in such materialistic times, this defeat is inevitable. Creative energy, Wilde suggests, should be used to transcend, rather than hopelessly to battle, the hostile cultural environment. Virginia's powers of imagination enable her to rise above the family's mentality and the "cheap severity of abstract ethics" and to embrace the New Testament law of love. Thus she can lead Sir Simon into a transcendent realm of peace. Her ultimate artistry facilitates his salvation, which Wilde places beyond question: "'God has forgiven him,' said Virginia gravely . . . and a beautiful light seemed to illuminate her face." She has fulfilled the prophecy on the library window:

When a golden girl can win Prayer from out the lips of sin, When the barren almond bears, And a little child gives way its tears, Then shall all the house be still And peace come to Canterville.

The barren almond blooms, suggesting the Tannhauser legend and the remission of sexual sins. And, as the opening lines indicate, Virginia has restored Sir Simon's faith.

According to its subtitle, "The Canterville Ghost," is "A Hylo-Idealistic Romance." *Hylo-Idealism* denotes the doctrine espoused by a small group of English free-thinkers during the 1870s and 1880s. From the murky morass of their journal articles, only one characteristic emerges clearly: militant atheism. It is highly unlikely that Wilde would preface his distinctly Christian story with an allusion to their philosophy. But *hylo-idealistic* does have relevance when one interprets its hyphen as an indicator of opposition; Wilde continually stresses the conflict between materialism, represented by the combining form *hylo-*, and Christian idealism. In this philosophical romance, the idealists overcome obstacles set up by the *hylists*.

The story actually encompasses three realms of experience. The Otis family, which subsists on a "low, material plane of existence," views life through the scientist's microscope. Their treatment of the bloodstain and the twins' irreverent attacks on the ghost clearly indicate their attitude toward the supernatural. The ghost lives in a sort of limbo, occupying a purgatorial realm where, though he can defy reason and the laws of physical science, he cannot completely escape their authority. Finally, Wilde presents the transcendent realm of imagination and spirit. He associates the mundane world of reason and materialistic monism with Old Testament morality. Here Sir Simon has committed a crime and been punished; here he exists as a skeleton. The ghost's purgatory is suspended midway between matter and spirit; he can pass through walls, but must suffer the physical pain of barked shins; he has risen to taunt his murderers' descendants, yet he must live under the damning pronouncement of their moral code. The higher realm of spirit and peace is inseparable from the higher morality of the New Testament. Virginia, because she has both innocence and imagination, can depart from her family's materialistic plane of existence, enter empathetically into the ghost's purgatory, and finally conduct him into the spiritual realm.

The conflict between hylists and idealists clearly anticipates the central opposition in "The Decay of Lying" between the literary modes of realism and romance. In fact, "The Canterville Ghost" embodies precisely what Wilde bemoans in "Decay": "Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of Fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of Romance." These lines call to mind the Otis family's analogous invasion of Canterville Chase. Not surprisingly, as Wilde continues his lament, he finds in America the epitome of the destructive materialistic mentality:

The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man [i.e., George Washington], who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie.

The Reverend Otis, obviously the possessor of these characteristics, fittingly named his firstborn Washington. Just as Wilde engineers the triumph of imagination over fact in his story, so he asserts at the end of "Decay" that "Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land." Both triumph and prophecy reflect Wilde's yearning for forgiveness and peace.

# Adaptations

"The Canterville Ghost" was loosely adapted into a film by the same name in 1944. In this version, set in World War II, Charles Laughton plays a cowardly ghost who meets a cowardly descendent played by Robert Young. Directed by Jules Dassin, released by MGM, the film is available from MGM/United Artists Home Entertainment.

A 1991 production of "The Canterville Ghost" from "Wonderworks" features a ghost who must haunt an old manor house until he learns to conquer his fears. Produced by Helios Productions, the film is available through Public Media Video.

An animated version was produced in 1986 by Orkin-Flaum Productions.

NBC broadcast *The Canterville Ghost*, adapted for television by Bell System Family Theatre, in 1975.

Patrick Stewart stars as Sir Simon, and Neve Campbell as Virginia in the 1996 Hallmark production of *The Canterville Ghost*, directed by Syd Macartney.

*The Saturday Evening Ghost* was the title of a 1936 stage adaptation by Samuel French.

Darwin R. Payne wrote a 1963 stage version of "The Canterville Ghost."

# Topics for Further Study

Investigate the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882. You may want to consult the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research; the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research; The Founders of Psychical Research*, by A. Gauld (1968); or P*sychical Research: A Guide to its History, Principles and Practices,* edited by I. Grattan-Guinness (1982). Who were the "ghostbusters" of the Victorian era? How widespread was the belief in ghosts? Compare real life attitudes to ghosts to the attitudes held by the characters in "The Canterville Ghost."

Research the Aesthetic Movement, also known as the Decadent Movement. You may want to consult literary anthologies as well as the following books: Elizabeth Aslin's *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau (Frederick A. Praeger, 1969); Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose* (Vintage Books: 1966), edited by Karl Beckson; and *The "Yellow Book": Quintessence of the Nineties* (Anchor Books, 1964), edited by Stanley Weintraub. What were the goals of this movement? What did the artists and authors involved believe? How does "The Canterville Ghost" fit into this movement?

The Otis family uses "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent" to remove the Ghost's blood stains, and offers "Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator" and "Dr. Dobell's Tincture" for the ghost's various ailments. How were such products marketed in the late nineteenth century? Consult sources such as newspapers from the 1890s, Sear's catalogs from that time, or books such as *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*, by Richard Ohmann (1996); *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, by Juliann Sivulka (1997); or *Early American Advertising* by Bob Perlongo (1985). Compare advertisements for other nineteenth- century miracle medicines and cleansers to the Otis family's claims for their products' effectiveness.

# Compare and Contrast

**1880s:** Homosexuality is considered a moral outrage and perversion punishable by jail. Homosexual relationships are hidden from societal view.

**1990s:** Although homosexuality is more accepted, many states still have laws against homosexual acts. Many people consider the homosexual lifestyle as opposed to religious doctrine. Legislation to sanction gay marriages and gays in the military has failed. Many states have passed anti-discrimination laws in response to vicious hate crimes that target homosexuals.

**1880s:** Nineteenth-century Europe and America are enamored with such practices as phrenology, the belief that a person's character traits are apparent in the shape of his or her skull. Some Victorians also believed in Mesmerism, developed earlier in the century by Franz Anton Mesmer. He suggested the possibility of mind control through hypnosis.

**1990s:** The practice of alternative medicine is on the rise, as many people turn away from technological advances and the complicated health care system. Instead, they use massage techniques, yoga, acupuncture, and other techniques to address serious health issues.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The Turn of the Screw*, expatriate American writer Henry James's 1898 short novel, is a densely symbolic ghost story. A young governess tries to save her charges from the ghosts of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. But do the ghosts exist only in her mind?

An earlier Henry James novel, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), tells the story of Isabel Archer, an independent American woman. Her adventures in Europe demonstrate the differences between American and European society. Isabel must navigate these differences at her own risk.

Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), examines in detail the moral problems of living a double life. The title character, despite his depravity, remains ever youthful while his portrait grotesquely ages and shows outward signs of Dorian's grave sins.

*Northanger Abbey* (1818) is English novelist Jane Austen's parody of the Gothic genre so popular in the early eighteenth century.

Praised by Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater's essay on William Morris's poetry, "Aesthetic Poetry" (1868), helped influence the Decadence movement of the late Victorian period.

James Walvin, a contemporary historian, presents a compelling overview of the Victorians in *Victorian Values* (1987). Walvin offers a view of nineteenth-century England that cuts through recent stereotypes of this era.

# Further Study

Ellmann, Richard. "Introduction," in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings*, Bantam Books, 1982, pp. ix-xix.

Ellmann gives an overview of the themes found in Wilde's major works.

Raby, Peter. *Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 1-11, 54-6.

Raby offers a brief analysis of the significance of Wilde's life to his works, and explores the various influences on "The Canterville Ghost."

# Bibliography

Shewan, Rodney. "Fiction as Ingratiation-First Attempts at a Social Pastoral: 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, "The Canterville Ghost, "Lady Alroy, "The Model Millionaire,'" in his *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, Macmillan, 1977, pp. 32-5.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891. Reprint. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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