

Otto of the Silver Hand Short Guide

Otto of the Silver Hand by Howard Pyle

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Overview

Otto of the Silver Hand was one of the first historical novels for young adults to present the realities behind the chivalric ideal. Pyle reveals the prevalence of cruelty and vengefulness in medieval society. The lesson that chivalry was not always glorious does not, however, overshadow the high sense of adventure found in the story. The story's unflinching portrayal of the unpleasant aspects of medieval life may shock some young readers, but its well-organized and exciting plot makes for entertaining reading.

Otto of the Silver Hand grew out of Pyle's research of the chivalric world in preparation for writing his Arthurian series. As he examined elements of the Arthurian tradition, Pyle became distressed with the knights' wickedness.

He had hoped to write a glorious account of King Arthur's realm, but found it impossible to ignore the harshness of medieval society. Ultimately, Pyle wrote Otto of the Silver Hand to demonstrate the brutality of the era and to suggest that history is different from legend. His dramatic illustrations breathe life into the story, making it more believable.

About the Author

Howard Pyle was born on March 5, 1853, in Wilmington, Delaware. He attended high school at Taylor Academy and then studied art in Philadelphia for three years before returning home to work as a clerk in his father's business.

In October 1876, Pyle moved to New York City, where he worked for two years as an illustrator and writer. Pyle then returned to Wilmington, where he wrote and illustrated books for young adults.

Born a Quaker, Pyle later adopted the Swedenborg religion, and many of his stories, such as *Otto of the Silver Hand* and *The Garden Behind the Moon*, reflect his religious beliefs. He died on November 9, 1911, in Florence, Italy.

Pyle's first published stories appeared in *St. Nicholas* magazine. Thirteen of his fables were published while he was in New York, but he soon found writing for children's magazines unprofitable.

Deciding to attempt bigger projects, he began planning a book about Robin Hood. *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* met with extreme popularity.

Pyle's second book, *Pepper & Salt*, containing stories that had been published in *St. Nicholas*, proved equally popular.

Pyle's greatest contribution to literature for young people was his four-volume Arthurian series. The first Arthurian series written for a youthful audience, it established the pattern for all subsequent fantasy series based on the legend of King Arthur.

Neither the Arthurian series nor *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* has ever been out of print. *Otto of the Silver Hand* is also in print currently, and these works continue to entertain young readers. But Pyle's strong reputation derives from his illustrations as well as from his writing. He illustrated adult books by other authors, earning a reputation as the foremost illustrator of the early twentieth century.

Setting

The story takes place in Germany during the thirteenth century. Pyle calls this period a time "of ignorance, of superstition, of cruelty, and of wickedness." He paints scenes of two settings that conflict directly with one another: the chaotic world of the castle and the orderly world of the monastery. At the castle, Baron Conrad's world, people are boisterous and aggressive. The Baron himself robs those travelers who dare to traverse the wild and dangerous area outside the castle's stronghold. The castle's lookout lives in Melchior Tower with his family, far away from the castle's gentry, and rings a huge alarm bell to alert the Baron when potential victims have wandered into the area. In contrast, the monastery is surrounded by vineyards, gardens, and well-kept fields. Sunlight streams into the courtyard, and peacefulness prevails. Although they prefer to live in isolation from the rest of the world, the monks seek to help passersby rather than do them harm. Within these two worlds, Otto, the Baron's son, grows to manhood. He takes the values of the monastery to heart and, in doing so, proves that he differs from the residents in his father's castle.

Social Sensitivity

Otto of the Silver Hand depicts the ultimate victory of good over evil, but it does not have a traditional happy ending. By the end of the story, both of Otto's parents are dead, most of his father's followers have died, and Otto has lost his hand. Yet peace has been restored to a land once dominated by violence. Pyle's descriptions of violence in the story are quite vivid, though he refrains from providing details about Otto's maiming. He does, however, attempt to offer his readers some solace in the face of this violence, depicting the monk's way of life as peaceful and virtuous. Pyle shows the importance of kindness and spirituality without resorting to doctrinaire discussions of specific religious beliefs.

Literary Qualities

Otto of the Silver Hand is simply written. The characters become involved in a cliffhanging adventure as the drama moves forward at a swift pace. Although the book was written more than one hundred years ago, its language remains appropriate for younger audiences. It contains the elements necessary for successful historical fiction: realistic events, a clearly defined and historically accurate setting, and characters who act appropriately for the setting and the time.

Pyle incorporates symbolism within a realistic story to give his writing an extra dimension. For example, after Otto loses his right hand, it is replaced by a hand of "pure silver, and the hard, cold fingers never closed," and the book ends with the words, "Better a hand of silver than a hand of iron." Otto's silver hand clearly symbolizes that he has brought parity and beauty to a land that was once ruled by the iron fists of violent men such as his father.

The complete format of Otto of the Silver Hand is noteworthy. Pyle's striking full-page black-and-white illustrations add realism and drama to the story.

While some of the characters never fully develop in the story, they come alive in the illustrated scenes. Some chapters begin with allegorical illustrations: the chapter in which Otto is kidnapped opens with a drawing of a human figure that represents terror, and the chapter in which Otto is saved from Baron Henry opens with a drawing of an angel visiting Otto in his cell. These illustrations underscore the religious implications of the story. The combination of realistic and symbolic illustrations reaffirms Pyle's use of these elements in the text.



Themes and Characters

Otto, the main character of the story, is an innocent twelve-year-old when the most dramatic action of the novel occurs. The son of Baron and Baroness Conrad, Otto has grown up at a monastery, sheltered from the lawless, rough environment at his father's castle.

Baron Conrad, a robber baron, plunders, steals, and wages war for a living.

His gentle wife begs him to give up his thievery, but the Baron, who takes pride in his role as leader, warrior, and provider, refuses her request. When the Baron returns home from a rampage critically wounded, his wife swoons, goes into childbirth, and dies. Although the grief-stricken Baron honors his wife's last request and gives up robbing, he does not forgive his enemy, the Baron Frederick, who injured him, indirectly causing the death of Baroness Conrad.

Baron Conrad later kills Baron Frederick, thus incurring the wrath of Baron Frederick's nephew, Baron Henry. Pyle complicates Baron Conrad's character, making him a thief and murderer who is nonetheless loved and respected by his wife, son, and compatriots. Arrogant and spiteful, the Baron is also sensitive and loving, and in the end, he bravely gives his life for the safety of his son and his men. The Baroness, meanwhile, never fully develops as a character, but does serve as a reminder of what the Baron has lost by continuing his ungodly ways.

Otto reflects his mother's gentle concern and serves as a warning voice calling out for the Baron's repentance. After his wife's death, the Baron takes the infant Otto to the Monastery of St.

Michaelsburg so that Otto can grow up in a stable, safe environment. Otto, described as a small, pale, emotional boy, is happy at the monastery, where he occupies his time reading and dreaming with his dear friend, Brother John.

Brother John, a simple, slow-witted man who sees visions of angels, becomes Otto's caretaker and friend. Otto accepts John's stories as truths, and in this way represents humankind's ability to believe in miracles.

Otto eventually leaves the monastery and returns to his father's castle. While there, he spends long hours with old Ursula, his mother's servant, listening to stories about his past and discovering what his father is really like. Yet, when asked if he hates his father, Otto declares that he does not. A pensive, gentle boy with a tender heart, Otto seems less a realistic character than a personification of divine forgiveness.

Otto's constant goodness and gentleness separate him from everyone else in the real world, and he becomes symbolic of Christian spirituality.



The two main characters who live in the monastery also represent spiritual reflection, acceptance, and forgiveness.

Abbot Otto, who is Baroness Conrad's uncle, functions as Otto's spiritual father. A man of great inner strength and love, the Abbot provides a contrast to Baron Conrad. The Abbot loves books, and he introduces Otto to "wonderful and beautiful volumes" filled with illustrations of religious scenes and people. He also protects Otto and, at the end of the story, escorts him to the court of the kind Hapsburg ruler, Emperor Rudolph. Brother John, the simpleton who daydreams and wanders the monastery, is also innocent, and remains childlike because he does not need to face the outside world. Otto, on the other hand, would like to believe Brother John's stories and to remain in the peaceful shelter, but is instead forced to leave the monastery and to change.

Another significant character is Oneeyed Hans, the Baron Conrad's strongarm. He rides at the Baron's side and, when Otto is kidnapped by Baron Henry, spies in enemy territory to discover where Otto is being held. Otto's rescue depends upon Hans, not his father, and it is Hans who returns Otto to the monastery at his father's bidding.

Hans represents the knights of olden times who would kill and maim for the glory of their lords regardless of moral concerns.

Otto meets another important character, Pauline, Baron Henry's daughter, during his captivity. Pauline, who visits the boy out of curiosity, becomes enchanted by his stories, just as Otto was enchanted by Brother John's stories. Because Otto agrees to return and marry Pauline when they are both grown, she agrees to help him escape by sending a message to Baron Conrad, telling him where Otto is. Though it is unclear whether the message is ever delivered, Otto keeps his word, and the two are reunited at the book's end.



Topics for Discussion

1. Otto's father is depicted as a thief and an arrogant man, yet he shows concern for his family and those who serve him faithfully. Can these aspects of his personality be reconciled?

2. What role does Otto's mother play in the story? Why does she die at the story's beginning? What is her relationship to Abbot Otto? Is this important to the story?

3. The book is entitled *Otto of the Silver Hand*. How soon are you aware that Pauline's father orders Otto's hand cut off? What is the significance of Otto's losing his hand?

4. Is One-eyed Hans an evil person?

Does his service to Baron Conrad make him a good knight? How does his behavior fit into the code of chivalry?

5. Contrast the castle and the monastery. How does Pyle use adjectives to create a mental picture of the two places?

6. Look at Pyle's full-page illustrations.

How do they bring the story to life? What events do they portray? Why do you think that Pyle chose to illustrate these particular events?

7. Discuss how this story's interpretation of thirteenth-century Europe differs from other interpretations you have heard. Which version do you think is more realistic? Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Consider Pyle's descriptions. How does he set a mood with the language he uses to describe places and people?
2. Compare the scenes at the beginnings of chapter 2 and chapter 8. How does Pyle make the events realistic?
3. Although the story ends with the reunion of Otto and Pauline, this book has not been termed romantic fiction.

What do you think the difference is between romantic fiction and realistic fiction?

4. Look at Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* and compare it to *Otto of the Silver Hand*. Why is the former not considered historical fiction?
5. Compare Otto and Brother John, Baron Conrad and Abbot Otto. Which characters seem most realistic? Try to determine if these characters represent qualities found in society. Why do you think Pyle uses characters to represent attitudes or morals?
6. Research and report on the rule of the Hapsburg family in the thirteenth century.



For Further Reference

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