

The Canterville Ghost



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

The child of well-off Irish parents, Oscar Wilde studied the classics at Trinity College in Dublin at the age of seventeen and matriculated to Magdalen College, University of Oxford, three years later. At Magdalen, Wilde's studies remained classically focused, but his eye was nevertheless caught by the emerging decadent movement and aestheticism. He consequently developed a reputation for being something of a "bad boy" that would follow him for his entire life. Still, he graduated from Magdalen in 1878 with a bachelor's degree in classics and very high honors. This same year, he published his poem, "Ravenna." For a time, Wilde travelled between Paris, London, and the US delivering lectures, mostly on the subject of aestheticism, and publishing poems and plays. Eventually, he married and fathered two children. Throughout his life, Wilde held careers as a magazine editor, a journalist, an essayist, a dramatist, and a novelist. In 1895, however, he was tried and found guilty by the state of having committed sodomy—homosexuality was, at the time, criminal. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor. Wilde's time in prison was at odds with his previous, posh life, and he did not fare well there. His health declined steadily, and he died just three years after being released from prison, while exiled in Paris. Today, Wilde is remembered for his legendary wit and the kind of pithy rejoinders found throughout *The Canterville Ghost*. His sole novel, [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#), though lambasted as profane and poorly written by critics in his time, has been greatly redeemed, and his magnum opus, the play, [The Importance of Being Earnest](#), continues to enjoy revivals.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the British empire was continuing to amass power worldwide, the traditional power of the monarchy in England was continually lessening at the same time that the power of the parliamentary government (which was democratically elected) grew. Under the reign of Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century, England underwent its final transitions to a constitutional monarchy—a system where the monarchy operates under mandates set forth by a constitution. Parliament, it seemed, was especially keen to represent the people. Beginning in 1832, Parliament began passing a series of Reform Acts that gave voting rights to increasing numbers of citizens such that, by the time *The Canterville Ghost* was published half a century later, the number of British men eligible to vote had grown from five hundred thousand to over five million (women would not be allowed to vote until 1918,

and only then if they were property owners over the age of thirty). With this shift in power towards the common man, and the subsequent rise of the middle class, the aristocracy—along with its power and wealth—began to wane. This is precisely the pivotal social and political moment in which the American Otis family in *The Canterville Ghost* enter to purchase a house owned for centuries by aristocrats.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* pulls much of its haunted-house imagery directly from the gothic genre. Many of these conventions, including Sir Simon's ominous sounds and the dark and stormy nights he prefers, come directly from that genre's progenitor, Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, [The Castle of Otranto](#). Wilde wasn't alone in borrowing from Walpole, or in extending the conventions of the gothic genre in order to make broader societal points. Both Henry James' "The Jolly Corner" and Charles Dickens' [A Christmas Carol](#) work similarly, though largely without Wilde's comedy. Like Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, Edgar Allan Poe's poetry also balances Gothic conventions with a dark, satirical brand of comedy. For example, Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" is both horrifying and humorous in tone and content, as Montresor, dressed in a mask and cape made of black silk, murders his friend Fortunato, who is dressed cheerfully as a court jester—belled cap and all. Irish writer Sheridan La Fanu also makes use of a similarly striking blend of comedy and horror in her works, which are satirical and Gothic. One might even argue that modern comedies like *Ghostbusters* owe a debt to the odd mixture of horror and wit that Wilde presents in *The Canterville Ghost*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Canterville Ghost*
- **When Written:** 1887
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1887
- **Literary Period:** Late Victorian
- **Genre:** Novella, comedy, satire, gothic
- **Setting:** Canterville Chase, England
- **Climax:** Sir Simon, the story's titular ghost, finds eternal rest and divine forgiveness with the help of Virginia Otis, an innocent and fearless young woman.
- **Antagonist:** Sir Simon de Canterville
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Inauspicious Beginnings. Although today's readers are most likely to encounter *The Canterville Ghost* as a standalone book, the novella was first published via installments in *The Court and Society Review*, a short-lived literary magazine. Wilde published another short story and a handful of essays in the magazine as well. Interestingly, all of his contributions came in the year 1887, and all were centered around the dual themes of Americans and marriage.

Highly adaptable. Like Sir Simon himself, *The Canterville Ghost* has had an exciting afterlife: it's been adapted to a wide variety of media, including films, radio dramas, animated television specials, and even an opera. Most recently, an animated film with voice work by actors Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry is in the works.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Hirsham B. Otis, an American minister, has just purchased an English estate named **Canterville Chase** from Lord Canterville, whose family has owned it for centuries. Everyone who's heard about the sale believes Mr. Otis to have made a mistake, because Canterville Chase is widely known to be haunted. Even Lord Canterville feels compelled by honor to tell Mr. Otis about the ghost inhabiting the property and the multiple members of his family who have seen it. Mr. Otis, who says he comes from a country far too modern to believe in ghosts, is not impressed by these stories. He agrees to purchase the estate, ghost and all.

A few weeks later, Mr. Otis and his wife, Mrs. Otis, take the train to their new home with their children, Washington, Virginia, and the twins. The ride from the rail station is a long one, and as they approach the house, the fine summer evening transforms into an ominous storm. Mrs. Umney, Canterville Chase's housekeeper, meets the group at the door and ushers them inside. After a short period of exploring the house, the family is surprised to find a **bloodstain** on the floor by the sitting room's fireplace. When questioned, Mrs. Umney informs the Otis family that the stain cannot be removed, both because it has already set into the fabric and because it is centuries old and has become a popular tourist attraction. Sir Simon de Canterville, she says, created the bloodstain when he killed his wife in 1575. Sir Simon disappeared shortly thereafter and, though he was never seen alive again, and his body was never found, his ghost haunts Canterville Chase.

The Americans react to the story of Sir Simon with the same disbelief that Mr. Otis showed about the ghost originally. Washington immediately sets to work removing the stain with the help of Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent, which proves to be quite effective. The spot is soon completely clear. It appears again the next morning, however, and for many mornings thereafter, despite Washington's

diligent and daily removal of it. Strangely, the stain seems to always be changing colors, sometimes into hues quite unnatural for a bloodstain, including purple and bright green. The family becomes convinced that the stain's reoccurrence must be the work of the ghost after all, though they are mostly curious about the phenomenon and not at all scared. At any rate, all doubt about the haunted nature of the house are removed when the ghostly Sir Simon makes his first appearance a few days later, in the early morning hours after the family has long been asleep. With his sinister red eyes, torn, dirty clothes, and limbs shackled in long, dragging chains, Sir Simon attempts to make a frightening first impression on Mr. Otis. But the minister takes little notice of these trappings, instead awakening only to offer Sir Simon a bottle of Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. The oil, Mr. Otis tells the ghost, will stop the awful squeaking produced by Sir Simon's chains and allow the family to rest. Sir Simon, who displays all the haughty indignation of his aristocratic past, takes great offense to this and smashes the bottle on the ground before storming off. Before he leaves the scene entirely, however, he is accosted by the twins, who rudely throw pillows at him. They force Sir Simon to walk through a wall in order to escape to his bedroom, a secret chamber hidden in a wing of the estate.

In his room, Sir Simon contemplates his long history of haunting Canterville Chase. He considers the haunting as though it were a job—one that he takes great pride in doing. He remembers multiple instances of past haunts, reveling in the scares he was able to produce in the English aristocrats of centuries past. Remembering these successes only makes him more confused about how he was so easily foiled by a handful of upstart Americans. He vows to himself that he will have revenge. After a few days to collect his thoughts on how best to accomplish this task, Sir Simon decides to try to scare the Otis family by putting on his old suit of armor and walking around the house with it. He waits until the family is asleep before beginning his plan. Unfortunately, he quickly finds that the suit has become too heavy for him to lift, and the only scare he manages is that produced by the loud clang as the armor falls to the ground. Sir Simon quickly finds himself surrounded by the Otis family: the twins shooting him with their toy guns while Mr. Otis levels a real gun at him, as though he were a common burglar. Again, Sir Simon is forced to flee from the Otis family, retreating once more to his room to consider his changed fortunes. The back-to-back failures take a strangely physical toll on the ghost, and it takes several days before he has the strength to make another attempt at a scare.

Sir Simon's third attempt is his most elaborate yet, with especially diabolical plans laid out for Washington Otis (because he keeps removing the bloodstain) and the twins, whom Sir Simon has come to despise. In fact, Sir Simon plans to visit each member of the Otis family individually, though he plans to take it easy on Virginia, as she has never insulted him

and possesses a gentle nature. The Otises have other plans, however. They've set up a kind of scarecrow (a fake ghost made up of a broom, a sheet, and a hollowed-out turnip) in the hallways to ward off Sir Simon. It is their plan that succeeds. As Sir Simon turns the corner, costumed in his most frightening garb and accessorized with a rusty dagger, he encounters the counterfeit ghost and is frightened out of his wits. For a third time, he flees to his quarters in terror. It's almost daylight when he finally works up the resolve to return and try to talk to the ghost (since Sir Simon is, himself, a ghost, he seemingly has little reason to fear other ghosts). When he does, he is enraged by the trick that's been played on him and yet again vows revenge—but he soon loses his confidence and returns to his room downhearted, tired, and on edge. He gives up renewing the bloodstain on the sitting-room floor and limits his ghostly activities to only those he feels bound by tradition to continue—he even begins using the lubricating oil to quiet his chains, lest the twins hear him.

The twins, however, do not give up. They continue to lay traps for Sir Simon, such as pulling string across the hallway, in the hopes of catching him. One such trap, involving a slide greased with butter designed to tumble him down a staircase, so injures and angers Sir Simon that he finds the strength of will to try one last scare. He pulls out all the stops for this one, donning the guise of "Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl." The costume takes a while to assemble, as he hasn't used it for nearly a century, and he's left the necessary props scattered around the estate, but he manages to bring it all together in time for a final assault the next night. The twins, however, are ready for him. As Sir Simon enters their room, he springs the trap they've laid for him and is instantly doused with water from a jug placed above the doorway. For the fourth time, the ghost flees to his room in a mixture of fear, defeat, and outrage. The physical toll of this last failure so debilitates him that he doesn't leave his bed for weeks. Even when he finally regains his strength, he keeps well away from the Otis family, though the twins keep a constant vigil. Even a visit from the Duke of Cheshire, whose family have long been the victims of Sir Simon's scares, isn't enough to bring the ghost out.

The Duke is at Canterville Chase visiting Virginia, with whom he has long been smitten. One day, returning from a trip to the meadows with the Duke, Virginia encounters Sir Simon. The ghost is in a state of despair and takes no notice of her, until Virginia decides to engage him in conversation. She tells Sir Simon that she feels sorry for him but assures him that her brothers will soon be leaving for school in the fall. This, she hopes, will grant him some reprieve—though she reminds the ghost that, while she does not approve of her brothers' treatment of him, Sir Simon has been very wicked of his own accord. For instance, she accuses the ghost of stealing her paints in order to renew the sitting-room bloodstain (which explains its strangely changing color), in turn making it

impossible for her to paint what she wished. The two talk at length, and Sir Simon tells Virginia about a prophecy that foretells the circumstances under which he might be able to stop haunting Canterville Chase and move on to his eternal rest. The divination says that a young, innocent girl must weep and pray for Sir Simon. It further says that the living residents of Canterville Chase will know that the prayers have worked when they see the long-barren **almond tree** on the property flower again. Since Virginia is so young and good, Sir Simon hopes that she might be the girl foretold by the prophecy and asks if she will help. Virginia agrees. The two disappear into a secret area of the home.

Virginia's absence is soon noted and a search party dispatched to little avail. Eventually, however, she does return, bearing an odd, coffin-shaped box in her hand. Virginia tells Mr. Otis that the box contains jewels given to her by Sir Simon, who has now passed on. She leads her parents and siblings to a secret room hidden in the estate, where Sir Simon was starved to death by his brothers-in-law and where his body still remained. Sir Simon's in-laws murdered him as revenge for Sir Simon murdering his wife, who was their sister. With Virginia's help, the ghost was at last able to find rest—a truth proven when the twins notice the blooming almond tree. The Canterville family is notified of what has transpired, and a funeral is held to bury Sir Simon's body. Mr. Otis tries to return Virginia's jewels to Lord Canterville, who refuses, saying that since the ghost was included with the sale of the house, as was the ghost's property. Virginia later wears the jewels when she meets the Queen of England, following her marriage to the Duke of Cheshire.



CHARACTERS

Sir Simon de Canterville – Sir Simon is the titular character of *The Canterville Ghost*. He has been an inhabitant **Canterville Chase** all his life and its ghost since 1584, when, for unexplained reasons, he killed his wife (leaving the infamous **bloodstain** on the sitting-room floor) and was subsequently murdered by his brothers-in-law, who starved him to death and left his body entombed in a secret chamber within the estate. Sir Simon treats his haunting of Canterville Chase as though it were a job, and it is a position he takes quite seriously. To this end, he has created several gruesome caricatures of his own making, each with its own unique assortment of props, costumes, and scare tactics in order to scare unsuspecting members of the Canterville family. For three hundred years, the Canterville family has lived in absolute terror of Sir Simon, and some Cantervilles have even killed themselves as a result of Sir Simon's antics. For this very reason, Lord Canterville and his family declined to live in Canterville Chase, making its sale to the Otis family possible. However, the Americans are so fundamentally different from the aristocracy Sir Simon is used to, that he finds himself unable to repeat his past successes.

They seem utterly immune to his strategies and, through their constant foiling of his plans, quickly wear him down into a state of physical sickness and exhaustion. Feeling increasingly weary and irrelevant, Sir Simon eventually asks Mr. Otis' daughter, Virginia, for help—a request that ultimately leads to him finding peace and eternal rest. This salvation was predicted by a prophecy inscribed on the library window of Canterville Chase, which also stated that the property's barren **almond tree** would again blossom once Sir Simon finally passed on.

Mr. Hirsham B. Otis – Mr. Otis is an American minister who purchases **Canterville Chase** from Lord Canterville. He is the husband of Mrs. Otis and father of Washington, Virginia, and the Otis twins. During the haunting of the Canterville estate, Mr. Otis displays remarkable calm and poise, giving Sir Simon some leeway in adjusting to the home's new residents (that is, once Mr. Otis recognizes that the ghost exists at all). He also chastises his twin sons for behaving rudely towards Sir Simon. In this, however, he proves himself an ineffectual father—for the twins merely laugh at him and continue their behavior unabated. When Sir Simon knocks over a suit of armor in the middle of the night, however, Mr. Otis, believing his family to be in acute physical danger, is quickly on the scene with a gun, demanding that the ghost put his hands in the air. Mostly, however, Mr. Otis is simply an American in a slightly stereotypical and exaggerated way. He gave his children patriotic American names like Washington and Virginia, talks about how superior America is to England whenever he has the chance (even in such mundane ways as the weather), carries a handgun with him, and actively advocates for all British citizens to immigrate to America. This quintessential “Americanness” appears in stark relief to the Lord Canterville's equally prototypical “Britishness,” making the symbolism of Canterville Chase's sale especially poignant.

Virginia E. Otis – Virginia is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Otis and sister to Washington Otis and the Otis twins. By the tale's end, she is married to the Duke of Cheshire, who has dreamt of, and courted, her for a long time. Virginia is fifteen years old when the story begins, and described as being an Amazon—probably meaning that she is tall, fit, and fearless. This fearlessness comes into play when Sir Simon asks for Virginia's help in finding eternal peace, as she must walk with him through a haunted scene where even the figures carved into the fireplace and embroidered into the tapestries of **Canterville Chase** come to life in order to beg her to stop what she's doing. Yet Virginia is not merely brave and tomboyish: she is sensitive and caring, too. When Sir Simon steals Virginia's paints in order to constantly recreate the bloodstain in the family sitting room, Virginia never spoils the effect by telling on him, because she feels sorry for the ghost. Indeed, she has a great deal of sympathy for the plight that her family (especially her brothers) are putting him through. Yet, she sternly rebukes Sir Simon for his faults as well. Thus Virginia establishes herself

as the kind of fair, wholesome soul that the Canterville prophecy says is required to set Sir Simon free and cause the barren **almond tree** to again blossom.

The Otis Twins – Known informally as the Star and Stripes, the twins are the youngest children of Mr. and Mrs. Otis and brothers to Washington and Virginia Otis. While we never learn their actual names, their joint nickname has two meanings—on one hand it refers to the Otis parents' patriotic impulses in naming their children. On the other, we're told, the twin's nickname refers to the fact that the twins get in trouble a lot, which their parents correct by spanking (a “stripe” can also mean a blow delivered by hand). The twins' behavior throughout *The Canterville Ghost* certainly proves this to be true. They quickly terrorize Sir Simon, accosting him with pillows and toys guns, and devising traps to ensnare or even injure him. At first, the ghost wants only to pay them back for this. However, as their relentless pursuit of him continues, Sir Simon eventually becomes too afraid of the twins to even imagine revenge. He only wants to avoid them at all costs. Interestingly, the twins are never referred to singularly and always appear together. They are the first to notice that the **almond tree** has flowered at the end of the story.

Washington Otis – Mr. and Mrs. Otis named Washington after George Washington, once again revealing their overblown American patriotism. Washington is the older brother to Virginia and the twins. Washington is responsible for constantly removing the **bloodstain** on the sitting-room floor of **Canterville Chase**, and as such earns the particular wrath of Sir Simon. He is described as a good-looking young man with an unfortunate fondness both for flowers and the aristocracy. Washington is not particularly fond of his name.

Lord Canterville – Lord Canterville was the previous owner of **Canterville Chase**, prior to its sale to Mr. Otis. He inherited the home from his grandaunt, the Dowager Duchess. Lord Canterville never lived at the estate, both because his servants refused to stay there, and because his wife, Lady Canterville, was unable to sleep there—all owing to Sir Simon's antics. Lord Canterville pays a great deal of attention to propriety, always ensuring that things are done the proper way. For instance, he's sure to tell Mr. Otis about Sir Simon's existence prior to the sale of the estate and is quick to allow Virginia to keep the jewels that Sir Simon presents to her. He also arranges the grand funeral for Sir Simon's newly discovered body, even though Lord Canterville's ancestor had been dead for hundreds of years. In this way, Lord Canterville is representative of the aristocracy in general.

Mrs. Lucretia R. Otis – Mrs. Otis, born Miss Lucretia R. Tappan, was considered a “celebrated belle” back in New York City. Now in middle age, Mrs. Otis is the wife of Mr. Otis and mother to Washington, Virginia, and the Otis twins. Though American by birth, Mrs. Otis has taken quite well to life in England. She truly is English in many of her behaviors and mannerisms, “an

excellent example of the fact that [the English] have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language." Mrs. Otis appears only briefly throughout *The Canterville Ghost* and always in tandem with Mr. Otis. In her single interaction with Sir Simon, Mrs. Otis offers the ghost stomach medicine, mistaking his demoniacal laughter for indigestion.

Mrs. Umney – Mrs. Umney is the long-time housekeeper of **Canterville Chase**, having served in the position for over fifty years. When Lord Canterville sells the property, he implores Mrs. Otis to retain Mrs. Umney in the position. There's some initial concern about this after Mrs. Umney faints out of fear early on in the story, but the Otis' eventually work out a deal with her, even giving her a raise. After these initial considerations, Mrs. Umney remains largely invisible throughout *The Canterville Ghost*. However, Lord Canterville invites her to the funeral held for Sir Simon, since she had endured the ghost's antics longer than anyone.

The Duke of Cheshire – The Duke of Cheshire is a young aristocrat who is smitten with Virginia and eventually marries her. The Duke first proposes to Virginia when she displays her horseback riding skills to him; however, she rejects him, and he leaves **Canterville Chase** in tears. This does not dissuade him in his attempts, however, and he continues to court Virginia. When she disappears with Sir Simon, the Duke of Cheshire is so anxious to find her that he joins the search party without a hat, forcing Mr. Otis to stop along the way. He assures his future father-in-law, however, that he doesn't want a hat. He only wants Virginia.

of class warfare by ridiculing both groups equally and showing them engaged in an absurd tussle over a decaying manor.

Critiquing both sides equally, Wilde reduces Americans and English aristocrats to absurd stereotypes. Using the Otis family as an embodiment of all Americans, Wilde portrays Americans as grotesquely vulgar and mindlessly practical. For example, the Americans are so practical that they hardly react to the presence of a ghost in the house. Instead, they mock Sir Simon, clean up the evidence of his existence, and remain immune to being frightened. This blasé attitude towards the presence of a frightening ghost is meant to suggest the ignorance and arrogance of American indifference to the aristocracy, which the British considered to be almost sacred. On the other hand, Wilde shows the aristocracy, as represented by Sir Simon, to be stuffy, irrelevant, conceited, and even pathetic. Sir Simon, whose tricks have terrified generations of English residents of **Canterville Chase**, cannot manage to scare the Americans. While Sir Simon is used to being feared and respected simply because he is a ghost, the Otis family treats him as a minor annoyance, which wounds him deeply. He sinks into a depression and then makes furious (though ineffective) plans for revenge, which shows the aristocracy's inability to cope with its declining power and relevance in the Victorian era.

Although Wilde mocks both British aristocrats and Americans, he clearly believes that Americans have the upper hand, and that the decline of the British aristocracy is inevitable. Sir Simon has been stuck as a ghost for hundreds of years as a punishment for killing his wife, and he longs to be released into the next world. Since Sir Simon represents the aristocracy, Wilde seems to suggest that the aristocracy, too, is in limbo. Aristocrats lack the power and prestige they once had, but their class has not been dismantled entirely. As such, they live in a painful state of trying to stave off the humiliation of decline by denying the obvious: their power is unsuited to contemporary life. On the other hand, Wilde shows that while the Otis family's practicality and refusal to be frightened or offended is perhaps uncultured, it is also an effective way to live. Sir Simon has ruled Canterville Chase for centuries, and the Americans are the first residents who are able to live normally in the house, which shows their ascendant power. Despite that Sir Simon cannot frighten the family, the Otis twins succeed in terrifying Sir Simon with a prank, which shows that American-style power has currency in the contemporary world.

While Wilde believes that the vulgarity and practicality embodied by Americans is the way of the future, he suggests that the struggle between aristocrats and Americans is foolish. Wilde's most evocative critique of class struggle is the Otis family's conflict with Sir Simon about the centuries-old **bloodstain** from Sir Simon's wife's murder. Immediately after moving into Canterville Chase, Mrs. Otis sees the bloodstain on the carpet, but cannot tell what it is. Once the housekeeper, Mrs. Umney, has told her, Mrs. Otis orders for it to be removed,



THEMES

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THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY VS. AMERICAN VULGARITY

The Canterville Ghost was written in 1887, during England's Victorian era. This was a period when the

English aristocracy began to see its long-held power in society diminish as the new middle class gained wealth and status. While many writers of the period imagined the aristocracy falling to the rising British middle class, *The Canterville Ghost* depicts irrelevant and powerless aristocrats succumbing to an even worse fate: ceding their place in society to Americans, the group they considered most vulgar. Wilde pokes fun both at the pearl-clutching stuffiness of English aristocrats, and at the tasteless practicality of Americans, satirizing the very premise

since she doesn't "care for blood-stains in a sitting room." The irreverence of her reaction—her lack of concern for how the blood might have gotten there—ridicules the overwhelming practicality of Mrs. Otis's relationship to the house. Mrs. Umney's reaction, however, is no less absurd. Protective of British tradition and history (no matter how grisly or irrelevant), she argues that the stain should not be removed because it's historic and it is "much admired by tourists and others." To leave a bloodstain in the living room of a private home simply because it's historic—and to admire a relic of violence simply because it's tradition—shows that the aristocracy is stuck in the past to a morbid extent.

Wilde's critique of both British aristocrats and Americans shows his ambivalence about what he saw as the inevitable trend of English society. He deeply loved the decorum and ornate belongings of the aristocracy, but he hated the oppressive nature of living within a rigid class hierarchy, and he understood the foolishness of clinging blindly to the past. Nonetheless, even as Wilde consigns Sir Simon and the British aristocracy to history, he tries to endow Sir Simon with some dignity. Sir Simon is the most charming and well-mannered character in *The Canterville Ghost*, and by allowing him to finally pass on graciously to the next life, Wilde seems to commemorate a moment in time that was once glorious but no longer has a place in the world.



COMMERCIALISM AND POLITICS

Around 1850, a new method for manufacturing paper made paper both cheaper to produce and cheaper to buy. In turn, books (which were previously luxury items) became much more accessible to everyday people, which led to booming book sales and made companies want to advertise in them. When *The Canterville Ghost* was printed, it was common for popular books to contain product advertisements tipped into the beginning or end, and sometimes even woven into the pages of the book itself. Wilde mimics this advertising in *The Canterville Ghost* by having his American characters use imaginary products in a way that suggests that they're promoting them—it's as though he envisions the advertisements spreading from the physical book to the fictional space of the story itself. Similarly, Wilde imagines commercialism spreading from its own separate sphere into the realm of American politics. Through the products in *The Canterville Ghost*, and their use by an American politician and his family, Wilde suggests that everything has been put up for sale in American politics: even its grand dream of equality for all.

To critique American politics, Wilde invents two products with symbolic names. The first is Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent, which Washington Otis uses to remove the centuries-old **bloodstain** from the floor near the **Canterville Chase** fireplace. Though it's perhaps not

immediately obvious to modern readers, the word "Pinkerton" would have been familiar to Wilde's contemporaries as the name of a security firm that used violence and manipulation to suppress organized labor, a movement that fought for the humane treatment of workers. The firm was notorious for its use of violence in breaking strikes and for its use of intimidation tactics to stop workers from forming unions in the first place. When the Pinkertons broke a strike, even if they did so violently, many people saw it as a "clean" action, since the Pinkertons were seen as a legitimate organization dealing with an illegitimate labor movement. Therefore, the Pinkertons' involvement in strikes concealed from the public the legitimate and even sympathetic demands of abused workers and helped to maintain an abusive status quo in which laborers lacked power over their lives and livelihoods.

The second product is Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, a lubricating oil that Mr. Otis recommends to Sir Simon as a way of getting the ghost's chains to stop creaking at night. "Tammany" refers to Tammany Hall, which was, at the time of the book's writing, a powerful New York City political machine. (Political machines aren't machines in the mechanical sense—instead, they are hierarchical organizations of people who wield political power through the organization and mobilization of large groups of voters.) The head of a political machine is called its boss, and because the boss controls so many votes, he often has more power than the officials his political machine gets elected. Tammany Hall helped Irish Americans gain political power in New York (the Irish were always an important topic for Wilde, who was himself Irish), but it was also marred by corruption. While political machines had the capability of giving voice to marginalized groups, they were also often mired in backroom politics and an economy of favors.

Both of these products operate in ways parallel to the political organizations for which they're named. The bloodstain that Washington Otis removes with the Pinkerton detergent is evidence of Sir Simon's murder of his wife, and the Pinkertons were often called in to assist company bosses in cleaning up messes, often with bloody results. The Tammany Hall lubricating oil conceals the noise of Sir Simon's chains. Tammany Hall greased the wheels for its political appointees, making it possible for them to win office, meet their political goals, and advance the objectives of the party.

In this way, Wilde paints a portrait of the multiple avenues available for everyday people in America to gain political power and equality being commercialized, literally turned into products for politicians to use. The labor movement, which might have allowed the working class to gain power, was violently cut off (or "cleaned up") by the Pinkertons, a commercial firm. Likewise, the power of the popular vote, which might have empowered everyday people, was sometimes cut off through by the corruption of political machines, which could easily be bought. In other words, the "squeaky wheels" of

marginalized people were quieted through Tammany lubricant. It's interesting that Wilde offers no equal critique of Britain in his carefully constructed evaluation of the failure of American democracy in the face of capitalism. Such a critique, however, might rightly fall on Sir Simon, who spends his days reliving the glories of his past hauntings. In this sense, the aristocracy becomes just a dead thing with no promise of a future whatsoever—and certainly not one that would grant people equal rights—though it continues to haunt the castles and lands of the English countryside.



MERCY AND EMPATHY

In a biting exchange between Sir Simon and Virginia Otis, the ghost tells the girl that he doubts that he would enjoy living in America. Virginia suspects that this is because America lacks the ruins and curiosities of England, but Sir Simon admonishes her: “No ruins! No curiosities! [Y]ou have your navy and your manners.” While the audience is surely tickled by this bit of humor, Virginia is insulted by it and makes to leave immediately afterwards. This, Wilde suggests, is at the heart of the problem between the English and the Americans. They are so mired in attacking one another that they can't come to any kind of real, productive conversation. In the end, when Virginia shows both empathy and mercy to Sir Simon, he is rewarded with the eternal rest he's sought for so long, and she is rewarded with wisdom about life, love, and death, as well as a handsome cache of jewels. Thus, Wilde shows mercy and empathy as the only potential escape from the cynical cycle of mutual sniping between the decaying British Aristocracy and the vulgar Americans.

Most of the time, both the Otis family and Sir Simon behave horribly to one another. Sir Simon instantly begins an attack on the Otis family, practically the moment they arrive. He waits until they've gone to sleep and then attempts to scare them through a combination of loud moans and dragging long, rusted chains. So, too, do the Otis family begin an attack on Sir Simon. This is true physically, in the sense of the Otis twins throwing pillows at and laying traps for him. But it is also true metaphorically, as with Washington Otis' removal of the **bloodstain**, which had stood as a kind of historical landmark for centuries, and their general breaking down of Sir Simon's will through their immunity to his efforts at scaring them. A perfect example of this occurs when Mrs. Otis offers stomach medicine to Sir Simon after he's just unleashed his most demonical laugh.

Importantly, both sides engage in this behavior because it's what they've always done, which hinders their ability to understand one another. Sir Simon's haunting, for example, is what the British have always expected of their ghosts, and he has excelled at it for centuries. As such, when the Americans find him distasteful and disruptive, Sir Simon redoubles his efforts, rather than considering how he might adjust his behavior to accommodate the new residents. Because he

refuses to see their side of things, he cannot understand why they don't fear him the way that generations of Cantervilles always have. The Otis family, conversely, takes no account whatsoever of Sir Simon's long history of haunting or even of what's expected of him. They simply consider themselves the owners of **Canterville Chase**, and expect that it should run as they see it, regardless of how things have always been. Like Sir Simon, the Americans fail to understand the deep history and tradition that underlie Sir Simon's behavior. This relationship mirrors the relationship between Britain and America at that time: as the American nation rose in power and prestige, the British empire fell. Yet, both had to continue to exist in the world together. Just as the British were alarmed by the ascendance of what they saw as vulgar American culture, so too were the Americans perturbed by the persistence of British tradition. Neither side, Wilde suggests, wanted to resolve these issues. That is, they both lacked empathy for the position of the other.

The ending of *The Canterville Ghost*, however, is surprisingly kind, in contrast to the raucous satire contained in most of the text. Exhausted by his efforts to terrify the Otis family, Sir Simon enters into conversation with Virginia, initiating the story's first productive dialogue. The conversation is marked by Virginia's concern for Sir Simon. She shows empathy for his situation and real distress over the idea that he hasn't eaten or slept in centuries. This genuine anxiety about his condition softens Sir Simon, who is then able to let down his guard and talk earnestly with Virginia about his struggles and fears. This conversation ultimately leads to Sir Simon being released from torment, and it also rewards Virginia with personal growth and wealth.

Importantly, the six lines of prophecy written in the Canterville library, which predict that Sir Simon will be released from his torment through a show of empathy, predict that it will be a child who shows him this compassion. This suggests that what Sir Simon truly had to wait for was a new generation of children that wasn't invested in the traditional sniping between Brits and Americans but instead was able to look past the superficial stylings of that conflict and see the pain and suffering that Sir Simon's long purgatory had caused him. Such a reading is compelling, because it is precisely a lack of empathy that led to Sir Simon becoming a ghost in the first place, both on his part (because he killed his wife) and on the part of his in-laws who murdered him as revenge.



APPEARANCE, REALITY, AND SINCERITY

During one of Sir Simon's more ambitious attempts to scare the Otis family, he finds himself face-to-face with a ghost and flees (as he so often does) in terror. Later, after considering that he himself is a ghost, and as such has no need to fear other ghosts, he returns to introduce himself to the specter. He discovers, to his surprise, that the

“ghost” from which he fled was little more than a hodgepodge of kitchen utensils and root vegetables, cobbled together by the Otis family as a kind of spectral scarecrow: something far different than what it appeared to be on the surface. Like Sir Simon, readers of *The Canterville Ghost* would do well to attend to the differences between superficial appearance and reality, as much of the interaction between the Americans and their British cohabitant looks on the surface to be one thing when it is, in fact, another. Such artificiality masquerading as reality, Wilde argues, only serves to create or heighten conflict, as seen especially in the conflict between Sir Simon and the Otis family. Only sincerity, Wilde suggests, can work to resolve conflict, and he shows this in the ultimate outcome of the story.

Sir Simon is, decidedly, an artificial character. He is not only a ghost (which is not a natural being), but he is also somewhat inauthentic in his ghostliness, as he takes on other personas to exaggerate his ghostly characteristics. These personas—including Reckless Rupert, a headless Earl, and Jonas the graveless, a corpse-snatcher—become increasingly theatrical, even as they increasingly fail to terrify the Otis family. More and more, he finds himself resorting to stage props, such as horse-pistols or a rusty dagger, which enhances his association with artificiality and pretense. Sir Simon also constantly undoes the work of Washington Otis by replacing the **bloodstain** on the floor of **Canterville Chase**. Sir Simon does this not through supernatural means, but rather through the artifice of Virginia’s paints, which he steals from her. Like his costumes, these bloodstains become increasingly absurd as the conflict escalates. In the end, he even resorts to a ludicrously green-colored blood, as Virginia’s blood-colored paints run out. In both instances, as the artificiality of Simon’s attempts mounts, so too does its transparency. Each attempt becomes increasingly ridiculous and less likely to convince anyone that it is real.

Though more “real” than Sir Simon, the Otis family nevertheless becomes associated with artificiality, too, in the sense that they are superficial. Rather than dealing with Sir Simon directly, they resort to ridiculous products to try to minimize or undo the work he does to scare them. For example, using the Pinkerton detergent to remove the bloodstains on a daily basis, and using the Tammany lubricant to silence the ghost’s creaking chains, are both examples of the Otis family dealing only with the symptoms of what’s going on around them while refusing to confront the reality that there is a ghost. In other words, the family is shown to be attuned much more to superficial aspects of the haunting than the extraordinary haunting itself—they’re missing the forest for the trees.

Virginia, however, is a model of the sincerity that the story suggests can cut through artificiality and superficiality in order to resolve conflict. From the very start, Virginia realizes that her paints are being used to create the “bloodstain” on the

floor. Yet, though she mourns the loss of her supplies, she never mocks or derides Sir Simon until she has a chance to discuss the situation directly with him. Furthermore, Virginia is an artist, who creates good, wholesome art designed to bring about wisdom rather than frighten or enrage. Though she is young, Virginia recognizes that her art ought to seek truth. This is why she gets upset when she sees the green-colored bloodstain; she realizes that, without the color green, she’ll no longer be able to paint realistic (or true) landscapes. By seeking truth instead of visceral reaction, Virginia is also seeking to break the barrier of artificiality and replace it with sincerity. Through this ability, she is able to see that all of Sir Simon’s artificiality is a smokescreen designed to cover up the fact that he is the only one in the story who is afraid. That is, Simon fears that, with the arrival of the Americans who are immune to him, he will become irrelevant. Since he cannot rest, irrelevance would be the greatest possible torment to him. Virginia recognizes this, and through her sincere approach discovers the only possible way to mediate this conflict. By showing him true empathy, and faithfully praying for his salvation, Virginia learns that she can set Sir Simon free.

Interestingly, Wilde seems to have undertaken his own kind of artificiality in writing *The Canterville Ghost*. The story operates as a comedy most of the time, but underneath it is a tale of morality (one that teaches readers about the value of settling one’s disputes with kindness instead of with easy satire). Just as Sir Simon masks his desire for peace in his biting wit, so too does Wilde mask in satire the true moral of his story, the importance of empathy.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CANTERVILLE CHASE

The sale of Canterville Chase symbolizes a profound change in sociopolitical power in England. In the past, very few people in England owned the land on which they lived, and most landowners were also members of the aristocracy. Land ownership was therefore inextricably tied to power and prestige—even the ability to vote was tied to an individual’s status as a land owner. However, under the rule of Queen Victoria, much of that changed. From 1832 onward, voting reforms were passed that increasingly allowed those without land to vote, resulting in a shift in power away from the landed aristocracy and towards the common man. It is in precisely this moment that Lord Canterville sells Canterville Chase to the American Mr. Otis. Thus, this sale is more than just an exchange of money for land: Lord Canterville is openly showing that land no longer meant what it had in England. It no

longer represented political power and prestige, but was instead now merely a commodity whose only value was in the money it could fetch on the market. More than that, though, Lord Canterville is symbolically transferring that voting power previously associated with land ownership (and thus the British aristocracy) to the American system (represented by Mr. Otis and family), which promised equality for all and had accordingly begun abandoning land ownership requirements for voting as early as 1792.



THE BLOODSTAIN

The bloodstain on **Canterville Chase's** sitting-room floor symbolizes the continued relevance of the aristocracy and, by extension, Sir Simon himself. All stains—whether they're caused by barbecue sauce or blood—serve as a material reminder of the event that created them. In this case, the bloodstain is a reminder that Sir Simon murdered his wife. People have remembered the murder for over three hundred years, even turning the bloodstain into a tourist attraction. However, within minutes of his family's arrival, Washington Otis manages to erase the stain and thus erase the material reminder of the event that caused it. It's likely that, with the removal of that memento, the murder itself will also fade from memory, along with Sir Simon's reputation as a truly violent, terrifying ghost. In addition, by erasing the stain that has marked Canterville Chase for centuries, Washington also erases the aristocracy's relevance. Sir Simon struggles valiantly against that by renewing the stain. However, he can't create new blood because, unlike the aristocrats he's used to scaring, none of the Otises have killed themselves in response to his ghastly pranks. Instead, he uses paint that he steals from Virginia. However, Virginia's stain-enabling kindness has a built-in limit to it—once she's out of paints, the stain will disappear forever.



THE ALMOND TREE

The almond tree that blooms at the end of *The Canterville Ghost* symbolizes unlikely beginnings.

Almond trees don't really grow in England: they're more adapted to hotter climates in the Mediterranean. So, it's no real surprise that the Canterville's almond tree has gone barren for so long. Its blooming, however, is surprising. As stated in the prophesy inscribed on **Canterville Chase's** library window, the blooming almond tree signals Sir Simon's final passing into eternal rest, thereby suddenly ending his three-hundred-year reign as the ghost of Canterville Chase. Now that Sir Simon has passed on, the **blood-stained** reminder of his crimes has been erased, and the aristocracy have vacated Canterville Chase, a new generation of people can come into power. This generation, marked by Virginia's marriage to the Duke of Cheshire, is literally able to marry American egalitarianism with

the better aspects of the British aristocracy—that is, they're able to get around all of the stubborn struggles of the past and move forward together.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Branden Books edition of *The Canterville Ghost* published in 2011.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ I have come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy [...] I reckon that if there were such a thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums, or on the road as a show.

Related Characters: Mr. Hirsham B. Otis (speaker), Sir Simon de Canterville, Lord Canterville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Otis has just refuted Lord Canterville's contention that Canterville Chase is haunted and assures him that, were such a thing as haunting even possible, the Americans would have long ago found a way to commercialize it (and ghosts in general). This quote illustrates commercialism's role in the text, showing that, to the Americans, everything—even the disembodied spirit of a man—can be bought and sold. Indeed, Mr. Otis goes on to prove his assertion, buying Canterville Chase along with the ghost from Lord Canterville. This purchase, he feels, gives him rights over the ghost, as he demonstrates when he later threatens to take Sir Simon's chains away from him.

☞ Indeed, 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.

Related Characters: Mrs. Lucretia R. Otis

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8-11

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is describing the Otis family at length, here focusing on Mrs. Otis—a scant character who appears only sporadically throughout *The Canterville Ghost*. Nevertheless, the narrator lavishes her with description, giving her a full paragraph before this quote, and here employing one of the witticisms for which Wilde was to become famous. The Americans and the British, of course, largely come from a common country with a shared history. They possess similar customs, and much of American law is English in origin. Certainly, the two countries share a language together, as witnessed by the narrator’s tongue-in-cheek reversal of this reality. The thing that actually separates them, for Wilde, is the haughty English sense of decorum butting up against rude American pragmatism. This is something the two groups can certainly get around, he feels—perhaps as easily as one gets around the difference between the Queen’s English and American Standard English. That is, Americans and Brits can overcome their differences by making a sincere attempt to effectively communicate with one another.

the fact that he’s afraid of becoming irrelevant. Mr. Otis, in turn, offers him a lubricating oil as though Sir Simon were a house guest walking around the halls with rusty chains and not a terrifying ghost. This inability on either party’s part to recognize the needs and motivations of the other leads to the repeated scare attempts and failures that make up the majority of *The Canterville Ghost*’s plot.

●● And after all this some wretched Americans were to come and offer him the Rising Sun Lubricator, and throw pillows at his head! It was quite unbearable. Besides, no ghost in history had ever been treated in this manner. Accordingly, he determined to have vengeance, and remained till daylight in an attitude of deep thought.

Related Characters: Mr. Hirsham B. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Simon, still fuming over the twins’ pillow attack, talks himself into seeking revenge. While the text claims that he’s “in an attitude of deep thought,” his inaction that same night could just as easily be classified as a result of fear of repeated failure—certainly this is the cause for his inaction as the story progresses. Notice that he’s already begun to think of the Otis family as “wretched Americans.” In the beginning of the story, Sir Simon makes his appearances as a matter of protocol, as though he were offering an expected turndown service to guests at a hotel. With this first rejection, however, he has already begun to stereotype the Otis family into images of little more than American vulgarity.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● On reaching a small secret chamber in the left wing, he leaned up against a moonbeam to recover his breath, and began to try and realize his position. Never in a brilliant and uninterrupted career of three hundred years, had he been so grossly insulted.

Related Characters: Mr. Hirsham B. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Simon has just attempted his first scare on the Otis family and has been rebuffed first by Mr. Otis, who offers him lubricating oil for his chains, and then the twins, who pelt him with pillows. This is also the first instance where the ghost is seen to suffer physically from his interactions with the Otis family. This is an exceptionally odd thing, given that Sir Simon is so immaterial that he’s able to rest against a beam of moonlight. The superficiality here is telling: Sir Simon has donned a complex theatrical costume in order to scare the Otis family, but he goes to these efforts to hide

Chapter 3 Quotes

●● I have no wish [...] to do the ghost any personal injury, and I must say that, considering the length of time he has been in the house, I don’t think it is at all polite to throw pillows at him[...] [u]pon the other hand [...] if he really does decline to use the Rising Sun Lubricator, we shall have to take his chains from him.

Related Characters: Mr. Hirsham B. Otis (speaker), The Otis Twins, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:**Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 19**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Mr. Otis discusses Sir Simon's scare attempt of the previous night. He mildly chastises the twins for their rough treatment of Sir Simon (a rebuke they wholly ignore). His demand that the ghost use the Rising Sun Lubricator is particularly symbolic. What he says, in essence, is that Sir Simon will either willingly choose to be silenced or be silenced by force—that is, Sir Simon can either use the Tammany product or have his chains confiscated. Mr. Otis feels he has the right to do this because he has paid for the house and therefore Sir Simon. This mirrors the way that political machines like Tammany Hall (for whom the lubricating product is named) could gain control of voices simply by buying votes and, with their amassed communal power, silence those voices that were unpleasant for it to hear.

Right in front of him was standing a horrible spectre, motionless as a carven image, and monstrous as a madman's dream! Its head was bald and burnished; its face round, and fat, and white; and hideous laughter seemed to have writhed its features into an eternal grin. From the eyes streamed rays of scarlet light, the mouth was a wide well of fire, and a hideous garment, like to his own, swathed with its silent snows the Titan form. On its breast was a placard with strange writing in antique characters, some scroll of shame it seemed, some record of wild sins, some awful calendar of crime, and, with its right hand, it bore aloft a falchion of gleaming steel.

Related Characters: Sir Simon de Canterville**Related Themes:****Page Number:** 26**Explanation and Analysis**

Attempting another haunting, Sir Simon encounters the Otises' absurd scarecrow ghost and takes in its horrible visage for just a moment before fleeing. Much of *The Canterville Ghost* borrows its imagery from the gothic novel genre, but nowhere in the novella is the language as exceptionally gothic as it is here. Yet, all of the staggering horror that Sir Simon describes intricately here is merely an

artifice of the Otis family. The scarecrow ghost is designed to match the artifice that Sir Simon himself displays in assuming his theatrical characters (the primary difference being that the Otises' ghost successfully scares its target). In addition, just as Sir Simon's theatrical characters, the Otises' artificial ghost only serves to deepen the divide between Sir Simon and the Americans.

Chapter 4 Quotes

He had not appeared in this disguise for more than seventy years; in fact, not since he had so frightened pretty Lady Barbara Modish by means of it, that she suddenly broke off her engagement with the present Lord Canterville's grandfather, and ran away to Gretna Green with handsome Jack Castletown,

declaring that nothing in the world would induce her to marry into a family that allowed such a horrible phantom to walk up and down the terrace at twilight. Poor Jack was afterwards shot in a duel by Lord Canterville on Wandsworth Common, and Lady Barbara died of a broken heart at Tunbridge Wells before the year was out. So, in every way, it had been a great success.

Related Characters: Lord Canterville, Sir Simon de Canterville**Related Themes:****Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 30**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Sir Simon is preparing one of his most outlandish, over-the-top scares to date—one he's sure will terrify Washington, the twins, the Otis parents, and even young Virginia. While Sir Simon has gained much of the audience's sympathy simply by how pitiful he appears to be, moments like these serve as a stark reminder that Sir Simon is essentially evil. He is a murderer, and beyond that, a fiend who takes great delight in ruining the lives of others—even driving them to suicide. Realizing this helps to elevate Virginia's role in the story, as we're reminded that she's putting herself in great danger by showing Sir Simon empathy and mercy. By doing so, however, she is able to convince the ghost of his error and lead him to seek salvation.

●● He now gave up all hope of ever frightening this rude American family, and contented himself, as a rule, with creeping about the passages in list slippers, with a thick red muffler round his throat for fear of draughts, and a small arquebuse, in case he should be attacked by the twins.

Related Characters: The Otis Twins, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Simon, having failed utterly in his most grandiose scare plot, now essentially resigns himself to a life of irrelevance. Despite being over three-hundred years old, he has never aged a day until running into the “rude American family.” However, in no time at all, they have reduced him to a sad, old man shuffling about the house in slippers. This is a perfect microcosm of the British aristocracy in the American era. Yet, despite the Otis family’s general air of confidence, which suggests that they need nothing, and their seeming belief that they could not benefit from the ghost even if they did, Sir Simon has much knowledge to offer that threatens to be eclipsed by their lack of compassion towards him.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● “It is absurd asking me to behave myself,” he answered looking round 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, if that is what you mean. 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.

Related Characters: Virginia E. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville (speaker), Mrs. Umney

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Virginia has just stumbled on Sir Simon, who is in a funk. They’ve largely ignored one another up until now, but seeing how sad the ghost is, Virginia strikes up a conversation. This is a pivotal moment in the text, as all artifice is dropped, and the American family can finally make an actual attempt at communication with the aristocratic Sir Simon. It becomes immediately clear why they’ve had problems: Sir Simon’s proclaimed reason for living makes no sense at all to the Americans. Conversely, Sir Simon can’t understand why they can’t understand him. Sir Simon’s admission of wickedness, though, seems a good first step in establishing a dialogue, especially when combined with Virginia’s willingness to listen to him despite his crimes.

●● “I don't think I should like America.”

“I suppose because we have no ruins and no curiosities,” said Virginia, satirically.

“No ruins no curiosities!” answered the Ghost; “you have your navy and your manners.”

“Good evening; I will go and ask papa to get the twins an extra week's holiday.”

“Please don't go, Miss Virginia,” he cried; “I am so lonely and so unhappy, and I really don't know what to do. I want to go to sleep and I cannot.”

Related Characters: Virginia E. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville (speaker), Mr. Hirsham B. Otis, The Otis Twins

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

Sir Simon and Virginia continue their conversation, with Virginia suggesting that perhaps England just isn’t the right place for Sir Simon. He might, the girl suggests, enjoy a sojourn in America. Virginia’s suggestion is meant as an empathetic and honest one—but it’s the type of advice that her father would give the ghost, and for that reason, it can’t succeed. Virginia’s suggestion fails to understand that Sir Simon’s problem is how deeply aristocratic and English he is. Moving to America would simply surround him with even

more Americans with whom he could not relate. Sir Simon interprets this lack of understanding as insincerity and correspondingly replies to Virginia's earnest suggestion with a witty barb, which threatens to dissolve the conversation altogether. However, when he sees that Virginia means well, Sir Simon at last resorts to a sincere plea for help—the very thing he's needed to do all along.

☝☝ 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

Related Characters: Virginia E. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This is the prophecy written in the Canterville library that foretells Virginia's coming and Sir Simon's long-awaited salvation. Virginia recites it to Sir Simon after he asks if she's seen it. The poem has had to remain quiet hitherto, because the reference to a "golden girl" would have made the novella's ending far too obvious, especially given the foreshadowing implied by Virginia's crying over her lost paints. Note well that it requires action on the part of three participants. First, it requires that Virginia give away her tears. Secondly, it requires that Sir Simon allow prayers to escape from his sinful lips (a firm reminder that Sir Simon is indeed a sinner). Lastly, it requires a direct intervention from God in the form of the impossibly blooming almond tree. This last part, however, happens automatically when the first two parties find it in themselves to do their part. Ultimately, Wilde implies that harmony between the British and the Americans, though it seems as impossible as an almond tree blooming in England, is as simple as the two parties making a good faith effort to talk to one another.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ Imbedded in the wall 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 its 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. Virginia knelt down beside the skeleton, and, folding her little hands together, began to pray silently, while the rest of the party looked on in wonder at the terrible tragedy whose secret was now disclosed to them.

Related Characters: Virginia E. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Virginia shows her family the place where Sir Simon was murdered by his brothers-in-law as revenge for murdering their sister, who was his wife. The scene is gruesome in the savagely inventive way that Sir Simon was tormented before his death. However, Wilde does not describe the scene in any of the gothic terms that have hitherto defined the story. Instead, Wilde carefully describes it as a tragedy. This scene, which feels like something Sir Simon might have enacted to scare the Otis family only a few days before, has become a tragedy through the power of Virginia's empathy and sincerity.

☝☝ "Hallo!" suddenly exclaimed one of the twins, who had been looking out of the window to try and discover in what wing of the house the room was situated. "Hallo! The old withered almond-tree has blossomed. I can see the flowers quite plainly in the moonlight."

Related Characters: The Otis Twins (speaker), Virginia E. Otis, Sir Simon de Canterville

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Looking out from Sir Simon's death chamber, the twins notice that the almond tree has bloomed and announce it to the family. Virginia shortly after declares that God has forgiven Sir Simon. While this symbol does metaphorical work in the sense that only God could make the almond tree bloom, it serves a practical purpose as well. Once Sir Simon has passed on to the next life, he will be unable to communicate with Virginia to let her know that she has succeeded in her efforts to find salvation for him. The device of the almond tree allows the girl to know that Sir Simon has found the eternal rest he so desired and not, instead, some other torment in the form of something like Hell.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ Under these circumstances, Lord Canterville, I feel sure that you will recognize how impossible it would be for me to allow them to remain in the possession of any member of my family; and, indeed, all such vain gauds and toys, however suitable or necessary to the dignity of the British aristocracy, would be completely out of place among those who have been brought up on the severe, and I believe immortal, principles of Republican simplicity.

Related Characters: Mr. Hirsham B. Otis (speaker), Lord Canterville, Virginia E. Otis

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

Just before his passing on, Sir Simon gives Virginia a box full of beautiful jewels. In this passage, Mr. Otis offers to return them to Lord Canterville at Sir Simon's funeral, but Lord Canterville firmly refuses. Mr. Otis' long-winded explanation of why the jewels can't be kept sounds haughty, and it threatens to reestablish the old feud between the British aristocracy and American vulgarity that Virginia has done such wonderful work eschewing. Luckily, however, Lord Canterville has the decorum necessary to know that he ought not to steal the young girl's gift. In turn, the jewels help Virginia enter into her marriage with the Duke of Cheshire—the vehicle by which Mr. Otis is won over to a better understanding of the continued value of the aristocracy.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Mr. Hirsham B. Otis, an American minister, has just purchased the estate **Canterville Chase** from Lord Canterville. Canterville Chase, Lord Canterville explains, has been the home of the Canterville family for generations. He further informs Mr. Otis that the house comes fully furnished—but it also comes with a ghost that has haunted it for centuries, making all of the estate’s inhabitants most uncomfortable.

Mr. Otis laughs at Lord Canterville’s belief in haunting, saying that the Otis family comes from America, a modern country where no one believes in such things. If ghosts did exist, Mr. Otis says, Americans would have put one into a museum already. Despite Lord Canterville’s warnings, Mr. Otis goes through with the purchase.

At the end of the season, the Otis family moves into the home, including Mrs. Otis, the couple’s oldest son Washington, their daughter Miss Virginia E. Otis, and the twins, who are called affectionately “the Star and Stripes.” As they approach the house for the first time, the weather turns from a “lovely evening” into a gloomy storm. They’re met in the doorway by the housekeeper, Mrs. Umney, who is wearing a black dress.

The narrator describes the family, painting Mrs. Otis as a middle-aged woman who is at once attractive and vivacious. She’s filled with “a really wonderful amount of animal spirits,” and she has a certain Englishness about her. Washington was patriotically named after George Washington. Virginia is a girl of fifteen, who is “lithe and lovely as a fawn.” She takes pleasure in besting boys in pastimes where boys are expected to excel, such as horseback riding. The twins are quite rowdy.

One of the first things that the family notices about their new home is a **bloodstain** on the fireplace mantle. Mrs. Umney assures them that the stain is centuries old and a real tourist attraction to boot, as it marks the spot where Sir Simon de Canterville murdered his wife in 1575. Mrs. Umney adds that Sir Simon himself disappeared from the house under suspicious circumstances only a few years later, and his body was never found. His ghost has, however, haunted the house ever since.

This moment might seem commonplace enough—selling a house. However, it’s important to remember that in generations past, the aristocracy simply didn’t sell their landholdings. Thus, to Wilde’s readers, this moment would have been a reminder of the rapidly changing times.



Note well the marked difference in attitudes here. Lord Canterville is giving up his ancestral home: a sign of the aristocracy’s waning power. Mr. Otis, however, seems to live in a world where anything is possible: even putting ghosts in a museum.



The change in weather as the family approaches the house is a common trope in gothic literature. It suggests that whatever horror is contained in the house is so unnatural that the natural world must react against it. Bram Stoker (with whom Wilde was acquainted) uses a similar technique in [Dracula](#).



Aside from Virginia and the twins, the majority of the Otis family barely factor into the story at all. As such, the time and care Wilde takes in crafting them as quintessentially, almost comically American characters allows these characteristics to become the most important things about them.



It’s quite easy to forget, as the comedy of the tale takes over for these early gothic elements, that Sir Simon is a ghost because he has committed an act of unspeakable violence against his own wife. This mirrors the way that many British citizens, who feel nostalgic about the grand days of British nobility, forget about the violence and oppression caused by the British aristocracy.



Washington Otis is unimpressed by these histories and instantly sets to work removing the stain from the fireplace using “Pinkerton’s Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent.” The centuries-old stain washes away quickly. However, as Washington steps back to show off his work to the others, a loud, ominous crash of thunder sounds, and Mrs. Umney faints.

Mr. and Mrs. Otis hold a serious conversation about how to deal with a fainting housekeeper. Mr. Otis suggests that they will deduct the time spent fainting from her pay, which he believes will stop the fits quickly. Regarding the thunder, he remarks that England must be so overcrowded that it can’t afford to have nice weather for everyone. He’s not sure, himself, why people don’t move away from the place.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, the Otis family discovers that Washington’s cleaning job didn’t stick: the **bloodstain** has come back overnight. Washington again cleans the stain, but it comes back the next morning, and again on the third morning, as well. Mr. Otis begins to wonder if he was too quick to dismiss Lord Canterville’s warnings about a ghost. Mrs. Otis ponders joining a spiritualist society and Washington writes two long, academic letters on the topic of spiritual bloodstains. By the end of the day, they’ve all come to accept that there is a ghost, but they go on living their lives as though this fact changed nothing.

That night, Sir Simon de Canterville makes his first ghostly appearance. He’s decided to try to scare the family by walking up and down the halls of **Canterville Chase** while dragging old, rusty chains behind him. He’s waited until one o’clock in the morning to do this, well after the family has gone to sleep. His efforts have an immediate effect: Mr. Otis is awakened at the first sound.

Mr. Otis is unimpressed by Sir Simon’s act, however; he comes out from the bedroom to calmly offer Sir Simon a bottle of Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, which he claims will quiet the ghost’s chains so that the family can sleep. Sir Simon, made terribly angry by this gesture, smashes the bottle on the floor and storms off down the hallway. There, he’s accosted by the twins who have dressed themselves as ghosts by wearing sheets over their heads. They throw pillows at Sir Simon, who only manages to get away by walking through a wall.

The way that Washington announces the name of the detergent feels artificial and out of place—almost like he’s advertising the product to the story’s readers, rather than talking to his family. The Pinkerton Stain Remover alludes to the Pinkerton security firm, which was known for violently suppressing organized labor in the United States.



Mrs. Umney’s fainting spell, while dramatic, is standard fare for female characters written by Victorian men. Wilde is particularly clever, then, in constructing the Otis’ conversation. If the vulgar Americans were better read, they would know that Mrs. Umney’s fainting was perfectly acceptable in British culture.



Spiritualism, the belief that the spirit continues to live after its body dies, was a surprisingly prevalent belief in the Victorian era. Photographic prints purporting to have captured ghosts were especially popular, as were seances. Queen Victoria herself was something of a spiritualist, believing that her late husband, Prince Albert, had contacted her from beyond the grave. Notably, the Americans take an empiricist approach to the phenomenon, here.



Sir Simon is taking part in a long-standing tradition of ghosts rattling chains. However, unlike Jacob Marley, the ghost in Charles Dickens’ [A Christmas Carol](#), who wears the chains he forged for himself in life as a kind of penance, Sir Simon’s are simply a costume. He can get rid of them whenever he’d like.



*It’s hard to say why a ghost should be so dismayed by a pair of young boys wielding pillows. It’s likely that the problem isn’t the violence the boys intend to do to Sir Simon (who, after all, is dead) that frightens him. Rather, it is their sheer rudeness and vulgarity that causes him to draw back in a panic. In addition, *The Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator* that Mr. Simon brandishes alludes to Tammany Hall, an American political machine, thus gesturing to the novella’s political and social underpinnings.*



Alone in his hidden, secret chamber of a bedroom, Sir Simon considers what has just happened. He is angry and shaken up, though his memories of all his past haunting successes (gained over the course of three centuries) help calm him down and focus him. These successes include some simple frights, such as appearing quickly before aristocrats like the Dowager Duchess. However, they also include some far more serious scares that resulted in the death of the individual being haunted, such as that of Lady Stutfield, who killed herself after Sir Simon's specter grabbed her by the neck.

Sir Simon says (to himself) that he's quite sure no ghost has ever been treated so poorly in the history of all of England, and he declares that he won't allow such treatment to continue. He vows revenge against the upstart Americans.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, the whole family openly discusses Sir Simon. Mr. Otis is upset to discover that Sir Simon hasn't taken the bottle of lubricating oil. He insists that if the ghost refuses to quiet his chains, they'll be taken away from him. Mr. Otis *does* chastise the twins for throwing pillows at Sir Simon, but they only laugh at their father.

A few days go by without incident, except that the **bloodstain** on the fireplace—which Washington still scrubs clean daily—changes colors every morning, so that it seems quite unnatural at times. Overall, the Otis family seems amused by this new occurrence. They even make bets on what color the stain might be the following day. Virginia, however, fails to share in their mirth. Instead, she encounters the stain each morning sadly, and she (inexplicably) comes quite close to tears the morning that it turns green.

Finally, Sir Simon decides again to scare the family. He hopes to accomplish this by donning his old suit of armor as a costume. He accidentally knocks into the armor, however, causing it to tumble over with a loud crash. The Otis family, assuming a robbery is underway, run downstairs to find Sir Simon rubbing his knees in pain. Before they realize who it is, however, the twins shoot the ghost with their toy guns, and Mr. Otis levels a real gun at him, demanding that Sir Simon put his hands in the air.

As it was when the reader learned that Sir Simon murdered his wife, it's easy to forget that Sir Simon has this blood on his hands. These intense frights, which resulted in the suicide of their victims, definitely seem at odds with the far more staid Sir Simon the Otis family encounters. This, no doubt, is a testament to the fading importance of the aristocracy (and, it would seem, its ghosts).



There is a slight echo here from the American Revolution, where the American military used unconventional tactics to beat the British. No one had ever treated the British army that way, either.



How Mr. Otis plans to take the chains away from Sir Simon isn't entirely clear. However, his confidence echoes his earlier assertion that Americans could place a ghost in a museum.



There's a kind of hilarity in imagining Sir Simon painting the blood stain anew each night. But there's a less pointed jab at the Americans here, too. They're so certain that they understand everything at first glance, that they never realize—with the exception of Virginia—that the "blood" they're cleaning up is actually paint.



This moment serves as a perfect microcosm of the British-American confrontation that Wilde presents as the novella unfolds. Sir Simon attempts to terrify the Otis family in a clunky, antique suit of armor. Mr. Otis, conversely, does the job of protecting his family with a modern firearm. It's quite clear which prevails. In addition, Sir Simon's suit of armor emphasizes his status as a stuffy aristocrat, while Mr. Otis' gun underscores his stereotypical Americanness.



Again, Sir Simon flees in a mix of anger and dismay, but he manages to collect his wits at the top of the stairs. He attempts one last scare by unleashing his best maniacal laugh (which is described as “demoniacal”) on the family. The only response, however, is from Mrs. Otis, who is afraid that the ghost isn’t feeling well and offers him a bottle of medicine. Enraged at this affront, Sir Simon ponders taking the form of a large black dog to scare Mrs. Otis—he remembers that this has worked well for him in the past against the current Lord Canterville’s uncle. However, as Mr. Otis and the twins are quickly approaching, Sir Simon instead grumpily resorts to walking through walls in order to again hide in his room.

Alone with his thoughts, Sir Simon reveals that he didn’t knock the armor over, but rather that it had become too heavy for him to wear. He fell over when he attempted to stand with it on, thus creating the loud crash and banging his knees. He’s quite disappointed in this, because he expected the Americans to be impressed by a ghost in armor, “at least out of respect for their natural poet Longfellow.” This failure, combined with the continued disrespect shown to him by the Americans, causes Sir Simon to stay in bed for a few days.

In bed, Sir Simon hatches his newest, best plan for scaring the Otis family. He assembles an elaborate costume complete with a rusty dagger. He plans to sneak into Washington’s room, wake him, and then stab himself in the neck three times while Washington watches. Sir Simon says that he chose Washington for this grotesque display because he’s particularly mad at Washington for constantly cleaning the **bloodstain** from the fireplace.

Once he’s done with Washington, Sir Simon plans to scare Mr. and Mrs. Otis by touching them with his ghostly hands and whispering to them secrets from the “charnel house”—that is, secrets from the grave. He intends to sit on the twins’ chests until they’re paralyzed with fear before crawling about the room in the role of “Dumb Daniel” or “Martin the Maniac.” He has planned little for Virginia, however, because she never harasses him and has a gentle nature.

As Sir Simon walks down the hallway to begin his plans, though, he stumbles across a monstrous specter that scares him out of his wits. Since he has never seen a ghost before (though he is one), Sir Simon doesn’t know what to do, so he again flees to his bedroom to hide under his blankets—losing his rusty dagger in the process.

Mrs. Otis thinks that Sir Simon has an upset stomach brought on by indigestion. This would be particularly insulting to the ghost (albeit unintentionally), as we learn later that Sir Simon was starved to death and has, indeed, been unable to eat for some three centuries. Whereas Mrs. Otis blindly offers him medicine, her daughter, Virginia, shows far greater insight and compassion into the ghost’s plight by offering him a sandwich later in the novella.



*Wilde met Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1882, the year that Longfellow died and some five years prior to the publication of *The Canterville Ghost*. Longfellow described Wilde as a “very agreeable and intelligent young man.” Longfellow himself, while an exceptionally popular American poet, was generally thought of as being more aligned with European styles and subjects.*



It’s not particularly clear why Sir Simon expects Washington to be suddenly terrified, when he (like the rest of the Otis family) has been consistently indifferent to Sir Simon’s scares. Regardless, Sir Simon stabs himself with a dagger in an attempt to frighten the boy. However, this is unlikely to scare the practical Americans, as Sir Simon—being dead—is past all danger of physical harm.



Generally, in literature, secrets from the grave are strictly off limits for the living. For instance, in Shakespeare’s [Hamlet](#), the ghost of Hamlet’s father tells him that, were Hamlet to hear these secrets, Hamlet’s blood would freeze, his eyes would pop out of their sockets, and every piece of his hair would stand on end.



*Despite all of his efforts to frighten the Otis family, Sir Simon is the only person in *Canterville Chase* that’s scared.*



After some thought, Sir Simon remembers that he is a ghost and should therefore not be afraid of other ghosts. He even ponders forming an alliance with the new ghoul to terrorize the Otis family. However, by the time he decides to try this plan, the sun has started to rise, filling the hallway with light. The extra illumination helps Sir Simon to see that the other ghost was a fake, set up by the Otis family as a kind of scarecrow. They've even put their own merchandise tag on it: "Ye Otis Ghoste, Ye Onlie True and Originale Spook, Beware of Ye Imitationes. All others are counterfeite."

Truly upset by this tactic, Sir Simon vows that, after the rooster had crowed twice that morning, "deeds of blood would be wrought, and murder walk abroad with silent feet." This, Sir Simon has read in ancient books, is an oath long used by his family. Every time it has been uttered by a Canterville, the rooster has crowed twice and the oath has been fulfilled. Today, however, the rooster only crows once. Instead of enacting deeds of blood, Sir Simon retires to a lead coffin for the day.

CHAPTER 4

Sir Simon spends the next week in bed as a result of his failures, the counterfeit ghost, and the strange failure of the rooster to crow twice. He gives up on refreshing the **bloodstain** on the fireplace, deciding that the Otis family isn't worthy of his scares after all. There's still a few ghostly duties he feels bound by tradition and decorum to perform—appearing in a window to frighten any passersby on the "first and third Wednesdays in every month," for instance—but he's given up entirely on trying to scare the Americans.

When these duties require Sir Simon to use his chains in the hallway, he makes sure to remove his shoes and to oil the chains well before beginning, so as not to awaken anyone. In spite of these precautions, however, the twins still won't leave Sir Simon alone. They prepare a series of booby traps that leave the ghost battered, bruised, and indignant.

These traps include strings being stretched across the corridor for Sir Simon to trip over, as well as the construction of a slide greased with butter constructed to cause the ghost to tumble down the stairs. This last attempt so injures and enrages Sir Simon that he prepares one final attempt at scaring the twins.

It's interesting that the Otises choose to patent their "ghost" with an attempt at Middle English, despite America having very little claim to that language at all (modern English having fully emerged by the beginning of the eighteenth century). It serves as a laughing reminder that Sir Simon, who died in the 1500s, would have spoken a very different English altogether from that of the Otis family.



This mention of an ancient family oath seems abrupt, and it foreshadows a similarly abrupt moment detailing a centuries-old prophesy later in the novella. Furthermore, Wilde confusingly refers to the rooster as Chanticleer, which is the name of the rooster in a series of allegories starring a trickster fox named Reynard. These allegories were often used to spoof politics.



The ceremony of scaring passersby on specific Wednesdays seems strange, and the mystery of how it began is entirely unknowable. The same can also be said for much of the tradition and pomp of the aristocracy, who are also participants in esoteric, seemingly bizarre, traditions and rituals.



By making the ghost strangely susceptible to physical injury, Wilde enables the audience to feel sad for him on a new level. Not only is he a once-proud man facing the irrelevance of (especially) old age, he's now also being battered.



Despite the injuries Sir Simon incurs to himself as a result of the twins' long torment of him, and despite Sir Simon's equally long history of bloodshed, Wilde never suggests that the ghost wishes actual physical harm on the young boys.



Sir Simon ruminates for a long time on how best to accomplish this task. Ultimately, he decides on “Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl,” a scare that has been particularly successful in the past. The costume is quite elaborate, and it’s been so long since he last used it that he has to search all over the house to assemble it all. Finally, however, he gathers the ensemble together and approaches the twins’ room. Flinging the door open with the hope of catching them by surprise, Sir Simon instead finds himself doused with a giant bowl of water—another booby trap set by the twins. As the twins laugh at their success, Sir Simon again flees.

As a result of being soaked, Sir Simon comes down with a cold and resigns himself, again, to leaving the Otis family alone. He walks the hallways now in slippers, bundled up to avoid making his cold worse, and carrying an antique gun for protection. Nevertheless, one night while Sir Simon is walking the halls, reminiscing about his haunting past, the twins and Washington attempt to trap Sir Simon. He resorts to fleeing through the flues of **Canterville Chase**’s woodstove. He arrives back at his room dirty and in a state of despair.

Afterwards, Sir Simon gives up all of his ghostly duties. This does not, however, dissuade the twins from their efforts to taunt the ghost. They continue to lay traps for him, but, as Sir Simon is no longer walking the halls, the traps only annoy the rest of the family and the house’s servants. The Otis family come to believe that Sir Simon has gone away.

After Sir Simon’s disappearance, the Otis family begins to live their life normally. Mr. Otis resumes writing a book on the history of the Democratic party. Mrs. Otis organizes a clam bake. Washington and the twins play card games, and Virginia rides her pony. Mr. Otis is so sure that Sir Simon is gone, he writes a triumphant letter to Lord Canterville about Sir Simon’s departure.

A visit from a friend of the Canterville family, the young Duke of Cheshire (whose family Sir Simon has terrorized for centuries during such visits), is almost enough to inspire the ghost—said to be “almost an invalid” at this point—to action. However, at the last minute he is overcome by fear of the twins and cancels the planned haunt. The young Duke instead goes to sleep and dreams about Virginia.

While Sir Simon is a ghost, he nevertheless has his own bedroom at Canterville Chase, and all of his props are real, tangible objects that exist somewhere in the same place that the Otis family lives—yet they never stumble on them. It’s important to remember that Sir Simon has lived in the estate for centuries and knows its various hiding places far better than the Otises ever will. This must be particularly infuriating for him, as they nevertheless now own the home.



With this latest setback, Sir Simon continues on his drastic devolution from a hale and hearty ghost, seemingly in the prime of his afterlife, to a fragile, timid old man. Note that he’s resorted to the American mode of defense by giving up his daggers and armor for a pistol. This, along with the decision to use the lubricating oil, is one of many concessions the aristocratic ghost has made to American vulgarity.



Earlier, when Mr. Otis tried to admonish the twins for their behavior earlier, they simply laughed at him. Here, they seem entirely out of control. The elaborate traps they set create a mess and a nuisance.



Wilde’s description of the family’s normal life is rich and, like his characterization of the family itself, decidedly American. One thing ties them together firmly to the aristocracy here, however: no one seems to be working for a living.



A feature of a large part of Victorian literature is the so-called “marriage plot,” a subplot which the Duke and Virginia begin here. This mention of the dream would have been a near certain indicator to Wilde’s readers that the story would end with Victoria and the Duke marrying.



CHAPTER 5

A few days go by, and Virginia—who has been out in the fields with the Duke of Cheshire—stumbles upon Sir Simon as he sits staring out a window in a funk. She tells the ghost that she's sorry for him, and that her brothers will soon be leaving to go to school for the fall, granting him a respite. She chastises him, too, for killing his wife and behaving in a generally “wicked” fashion.

Sir Simon replies that, while it wasn't nice to kill his wife, he had his reasons—though he doesn't give them. At any rate, he says, it wasn't nice of his wife's brothers to starve him to death as revenge, which is what made him a ghost. Surprised and saddened by the revelation that Sir Simon was starved, Virginia offers the ghost a sandwich.

Sir Simon appreciates the gesture but declines Virginia's sandwich. He tells her that she's much nicer than her horrid family, but Virginia will hear nothing of it. She tells the ghost that he's the one that's been horrid: especially since he's been stealing her craft paints in order to renew the **bloodstain** on the fireplace night after night. By constantly depleting her supply of colors, he's made it impossible for her to paint the things she'd like. She adds that many of the colors to which Sir Simon resorted, such as emerald green, were ridiculous. Sir Simon, however, retorts that the Cantervilles themselves have blue blood.

Virginia suggests that Sir Simon might prefer to immigrate to America, but the ghost doesn't think he'd like it there. Instead, he asks Virginia to stay and talk with him for a while longer. He needs her help, he says, so that he can finally get some sleep after three long centuries without it. Sir Simon proceeds to tell Virginia about an ancient prophecy that states that a little golden-haired child (like Virginia) can bring peace to **Canterville Chase**. All she has to do is weep for Sir Simon and pray for the forgiveness of his sins. If it works, she'll know, because an old **almond tree** on the property will bloom.

Virginia agrees to help, though Sir Simon warns her that it might be scary. Together, they disappear into an unknown portion of the house. Along the way, the animals carved into the fireplace and the huntsmen embroidered into the home's tapestries are suddenly brought to life and warn her to turn back. However, she continues.

Here, as before, there's a general downplaying of Sir Simon's crimes. He murdered his wife and has since been the cause of multiple suicides—a fact in which he takes great pride. Virginia's gentle chastising, however, doesn't seem out of place given the work Wilde has done to humanize Sir Simon.



The cause of Sir Simon's death has never been revealed prior to this moment. It's shocking, but its impact is lessened somewhat by the fact that it was only Sir Simon's body that died. His ghost has led a very full life in the three-hundred years since. Meanwhile, by offering Sir Simon a sandwich, Virginia humanizes the ghost and shows him compassion and kindness—a sharp contrast from the treatment he's received from the rest of the Otises.



“Blue blood” is an idiom used to refer to aristocrats. It's believed that European aristocrats, who were exclusively white, prided themselves on the way that their veins were visible on their pale arms. Since the blood flowing through veins is oxygen-depleted, it appears blue. For those with darker skin (due to race or sun exposure from outdoor labor), veins aren't as visible, so the aristocrats believed themselves alone to possess this “blue blood.”



*This is an example of a literary device known as *deus ex machina*. These occur when a writer seems to have backed himself into a corner, plot-wise, and has to invent a way out for his characters. They're readily identifiable by how forced and unnatural they feel—as the sudden appearance of this prophecy does. Still, Wilde couldn't have introduced the prophecy any earlier, or the ending of the story would have been far too obvious.*



For a story whose main character is a three-hundred-year-old ghost, Wilde does a remarkable job of making this moment seem at once magical and dangerous. The reader feels compassion for Sir Simon but at the same time wonders if he can be trusted, considering he is a murderer.



CHAPTER 6

Mr. and Mrs. Otis are quick to notice Virginia's absence and they instantly raise a cry of alarm when she can't be found. A party of gypsies camping on the **Canterville Chase** grounds are immediately suspected, and Mr. Otis goes out on the hunt for them along with the Duke of Cheshire. They stop along the way, however, to buy the Duke a hat so that he's properly outfitted for such an excursion (the Duke replies that he doesn't want a hat; he wants Virginia). Washington is sent out as well with a larger search party.

The searchers locate the gypsies, who have no knowledge whatsoever of Virginia but join in the hunt. Back at **Canterville Chase**, searchers drag the pond and scour the entire property to no avail. Exhausted, Mr. Otis orders everyone back home, where they eat a solemn meal together before retiring to bed. At the stroke of midnight, however, a loud crash resounds throughout the house and Virginia appears at the top of the staircase holding a small ornamental casket. She tells her father that the casket contains beautiful jewels given to her by the ghost of Sir Simon before he passed on. Then she bids the entire family to come and see Sir Simon's secret chamber, where his brothers-in-law starved him to death.

The Otis family follow Virginia to the room, where they find a skeleton chained to the wall. Just out of its reach are a jug of water and a plate of food that has turned, long ago, to dust. God, Virginia declares solemnly, has forgiven Sir Simon and allowed him to rest at last. The twins confirm this when they notice the **almond tree** blooming.

CHAPTER 7

Since Sir Simon's physical body has at last been discovered, Lord Canterville arranges a grand funeral for Sir Simon, which is attended by the Otis family and Mrs. Umney, among others. After the funeral, Mr. Otis approaches Lord Canterville about the jewels Sir Simon has left to Virginia. They're quite valuable, and Mr. Otis doesn't feel right about the girl having them, as they're surely Canterville family heirlooms. Lord Canterville, however, assures him that Virginia has done the family a great service, and the jewels belong to her. Regardless, Lord Canterville reminds Mr. Otis that **Canterville Chase** came with a ghost, so it only makes sense that it also came with the ghost's property.

The word gypsy carries a pejorative meaning that can be understood through this scene. The Romani people were and are nomadic, travelling across the world without a homeland. As permanent outsiders, they have often been stigmatized and persecuted, and the easy association of them with kidnapping would have been typical in Wilde's time and in many eras prior.



*Calling off the search for Virginia in order to eat a familial meal around the table—or procure a hat—seems bizarre. One should take care not to assign this entirely to the tale's decorum-obsessed day and age, however. When Lady Dedlock disappears in Charles Dickens' **Bleak House**, the need to attend to such customs disappears altogether. This abandonment of the proper way of doing things creates a moment of uniquely high drama. Wilde eschews this. Doing so lends a comic note, certainly, but it also should make the reader pause.*



Sir Simon never mentions the exceptional cruelty of his brothers-in-law in starving him to death in plain sight of sustenance—perhaps because this would raise the question of how cruel Sir Simon must have been to their sister in order to warrant such a reaction.



Virginia's jewels represent what Wilde saw as beautiful in the British aristocracy: its ornateness, its concern for aesthetics, its desire to forget the ugliness of the world. Attaching the jewels to Virginia, an American, makes her something of a hybrid. In addition to her innate goodness and mercy (things the aristocracy decidedly lacked), she now has this aristocratic value (which she had already begun to cultivate in herself through her painting).



The jewels do come to Virginia's assistance when in the following days she is engaged and then wedded to the Duke of Cheshire—a ceremony that requires her to stand before Queen Victoria herself. Mr. Otis disapproves of this marriage initially, even though he likes the Duke of Cheshire, because he doesn't believe in titles (like "Duke"). However, he eventually comes to approve of the marriage when he sees the beauty and grandeur of the wedding ceremony.

Later, alone at **Canterville Chase**, the Duke asks Virginia what happened when she was alone with Sir Simon. She says that she can't tell him, but that the ghost made her "see what Life is, and what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both." The Duke says he is satisfied with this answer, so long as he has Virginia's heart, and as long as she promises to tell their children what the ghost said to her. Virginia, blushing at the mention of their future children, agrees.

There's a bit of a tongue-in-cheek moment in Mr. Otis' sudden change of heart regarding the Duke. Mr. Otis has a natural American dislike for hereditary titles, but this changes quickly when he realizes the extent of wealth and grandeur that the aristocracy still control and to which his daughter now has access.



This passage presents a possible modification of Solomon 8:6, "for love is as strong as death and jealousy as cruel as the grave." It seems that the Duke is mildly jealous that Virginia has this one secret from him, and it is a secret that comes from the grave.





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