

Oscar Wilde

The Canterville Ghost



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Oscar Wilde

The Canterville Ghost

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Contents

4	▶	The life of Oscar Wilde	
8	▶	Before you read	
10	▶	Chapter 1	
		The Haunted House	10
		Chapter 2	
		Sir Simon Appears	16
		Chapter 3	
		Two Ghosts!	22
		Chapter 4	
		Virginia's Discovery	28
		Chapter 5	
		A Golden Girl	33
		Chapter 6	
		Virginia's Secret	38
44	▶	Dossiers	
		Wilde's American adventure	
		Haunted Britain	48
51	▶	Activities	

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The life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. After he finished his education in Ireland, he studied at Oxford University in England. He was an excellent student. He travelled a lot in Europe and made many friends. But he also made many enemies.

He wore unusual clothes and had unusual opinions about religion and life. He liked to be the centre of attention.

In 1882, Oscar Wilde went on a lecture tour¹ of the United States.

When he arrived, the Customs Officer² asked him: 'Do you have anything to declare?' Wilde answered: 'I have nothing to declare except my genius.'

When he left, he said: 'I have civilised America'.³

He married in 1884. He and his wife, Constance, had two sons. He wrote his most famous children's story, '*The Happy Prince*', for his sons. He became famous in London as a poet, a writer and a dramatist. His conversation was very witty. He went to many parties

1. lecture tour : he talked in public in many different cities.

2. Customs Officer : person who checks the luggage of people arriving in or leaving a country.

3. have civilised America : have brought culture to America.

and was very popular. He was the most famous writer in London when his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was performed in 1895. It is his best play.

Wilde was homosexual and he was sent to prison for this for two years (1895-97). Many of his friends did not defend him. After he was released, he lived in France. The last years of his life were very sad. He died in 1900, only forty-six years old.

The times of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde lived in the Victorian Age. Queen Victoria ruled Britain for over sixty years from 1837 to 1901. During her reign,⁴ Britain was a very powerful nation. It had successful industry, a large empire and great writers and artists.

Tower Bridge and the Houses of Parliament were built. Charles Dickens wrote his novels. Railways were developed. Britain and other European nations explored Africa and took lands there. London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and other big cities

4. reign : period when a king or queen has power.



► **Pentonville Road** Looking West, London, Evening, by John O'Connor.

grew quickly. Many people were rich but there were also many very poor people too.

Most Victorians had very strong moral beliefs. Marriage, patriotism and going to church were considered very important. It was a difficult time for people who had unconventional⁵ ideas.

Oscar Wilde's plays and stories are often very light-hearted and they laugh at Victorian beliefs. He often suggested that art and wit were the most important things in life. He liked to shock people. America was a new nation, growing in power and success. Many English people thought that it had money but no civilisation. Oscar Wilde sometimes laughed at the Americans. But, in *The Canterville Ghost*, the American family have many good qualities. Wilde shows that the English can learn from the modern opinions and behaviour of Mr Hiram B. Otis and his family, who are not afraid of anything.

5. unconventional : unusual, different from normal society.

Comprehension Check

1. Was Oscar Wilde English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh?
2. When he went on a lecture tour of the USA, what did he say on arriving and leaving? How do you think Americans reacted to this?
3. In 1895 Oscar Wilde was the most famous writer in London, but five years later he was dead. What happened to him? How and where did he die?
4. How was Wilde different from most Victorians?

The Characters



From top to bottom (left to right):
Lucretia Otis, Mr Hiram B. Otis, The Ghost, Lord Canterville, The Twins,
Virginia, Mrs Humney, Cecil, Washington.

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Vocabulary • Match each word from the box with one of the definitions 1-10. There is an example.

~~a ghost~~ a legend a skeleton a stain a chain
to haunt to murder guilty invisible superstitious visible

0. the spirit of a dead person which returns to the places where he or she lived a ghost
1. feeling bad because of something wrong which you have done
2. not able to be seen
3. this word is used for ghosts when they often appear in a place
4. to kill someone
5. a dirty mark which is difficult to clean
6. able to be seen
7. the complete set of bones of a body
8. believing easily in ghosts, good and bad luck etc.
9. a story about the past which may be untrue or only partly true
10. a lot of metal rings make this

2 Horror • If you wanted to make a horror film, which of these things would you include? Choose the five most horrific things, then add one more. Compare ideas with another student. You will meet some of these things in *The Canterville Ghost*. But don't worry, the story is also very funny.

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1. black birds | ☐ | 7. lightning (= a light that comes out of the sky) | ☐ |
| 2. trees with no leaves | ☐ | 8. a ghost with no head | ☐ |
| 3. a skeleton | ☐ | 9. a blood-stained knife | ☐ |
| 4. strange noises | ☐ | 10. an Egyptian mummy | ☐ |
| 5. spiders | ☐ | 11. a secret room | ☐ |
| 6. thunder (= a loud sound from the sky) | ☐ | | |

3 Using the vocabulary • Use one word from exercise 1 to replace the underlined words below. You can change the form of the words if necessary, e.g. *skeleton+s* or *murder+ed*.

There are many (1) old stories about the (2) spirits of dead people which come back to (3) appear in old houses. People who are (4) ready to believe in mysterious things may find it easy to believe in these stories. If they see a red (5) mark on a floor, they will think that it is blood. ‘Someone (6) killed someone here hundreds of years ago,’ they say. ‘Perhaps the killer feels (7) bad about the crime and will return. He may be (8) impossible to see or he may be (9) easy to see.’

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.

4 The Ghost and you • Look at the reasons to feel sorry for ghosts and to dislike ghosts (a-h). Write the letters in the appropriate part of the table. There is an example. As you read, ask yourself if you feel sorry for the *Canterville Ghost* or not.

- a Ghosts are lonely
- b Ghosts make people feel afraid
- c Some ghosts did bad things during their life
- d People who die and become ghosts have no peace
- e Ghosts enjoy it when people see them and scream
- f Ghosts probably prefer not to be ghosts!
- g People who have horrible sad lives often come back as ghosts
- h Ghosts may come into your room at night

Reasons to feel sorry for ghosts	Reasons to dislike ghosts
a	



CHAPTER 1

The Haunted House

Lord Canterville lived in a fine old English house called Canterville Chase. When Mr Hiram B. Otis saw it, he immediately decided to buy it. He was a rich and very important American with a large family and he wanted to live in England. Everyone told him that he was very foolish. ‘There is a ghost,’ they said. ‘Canterville Chase is haunted!’



track 02

Lord Canterville himself told Mr Otis why he preferred not to live in the house.

‘Many members of my family have seen the Ghost. My grandaunt, the Duchess, was dressing for dinner one night when, suddenly, the hands of a skeleton touched her on the shoulders. She has never recovered from the shock. My wife, Lady Canterville, cannot sleep at night because of the mysterious noises in the house.’



CHAPTER 1

‘My Lord,’ said Mr Otis, ‘I’ll take the house with the furniture and the Ghost. I come from a modern country where we have everything that money can buy. If ghosts really existed in Europe, I’m sure that an American would take one back home. He would put it in a museum or a show for everyone to see.’

Lord Canterville smiled. ‘The Ghost really exists. People have seen it many times in the last three hundred years, since 1584 in fact. It always appears before the death of any member of my family.’

‘Well, sir, in *my* home the doctor appears before the death of any member of my family,’ laughed Mr Otis.

‘But I’m an American,’ he continued, ‘and Americans don’t believe in ghosts. They’re an old-fashioned European idea.’

‘If you don’t mind a ghost in the house, that’s all right. But please remember that I have told you.’

A few weeks later Lord Canterville sold Canterville Chase to the Americans.

There were six people in the Otis family. Mr Otis himself was a minister of the United States government. His wife, Mrs Lucretia Otis, was a beautiful lady. As a young woman in New York, she had been famous for her beauty. She was full of energy and very healthy.

They had called their oldest son Washington¹ in a moment of patriotism. He was tall, blond and good-looking. He liked dancing very much and his only fault was that he enjoyed the company of the British aristocracy. His sister, Virginia, was fifteen years old with large blue eyes; she was lovely. She loved riding her pony in the country. A young English lord, Cecil, Duke of Cheshire, was in love with her. The youngest children were twins.² They were often naughty but everybody liked them.

1. Washington : George Washington became the first president of the United States in 1789.

2. twins : two babies born at the same time.



When the family came to live at the house, they drove from the station in a carriage. It was a lovely July evening. The sun was low in the sky and the birds were singing. But as they came near Canterville Chase, the weather changed. Dark clouds appeared. Some large black birds flew over their heads. It began to rain. In the garden near the house, they saw an old black tree with no leaves or flowers on it.

An old woman dressed in black with a white apron was waiting for them on the steps of the house. This was Mrs Umney, the housekeeper.³

3. housekeeper : person who looks after the house.

CHAPTER 1

‘Welcome to Canterville Chase,’ she said. They followed her through the dark wooden hall into the library. Tea⁴ was ready for them.

Suddenly Mrs Otis saw a dark red stain on the floor by the fireplace.

‘What’s that mark?’ she asked.

‘It’s blood,’ replied the old housekeeper.

‘How horrible!’ said Mrs Otis. ‘I don’t like bloodstains in the sitting room. Please remove it.’

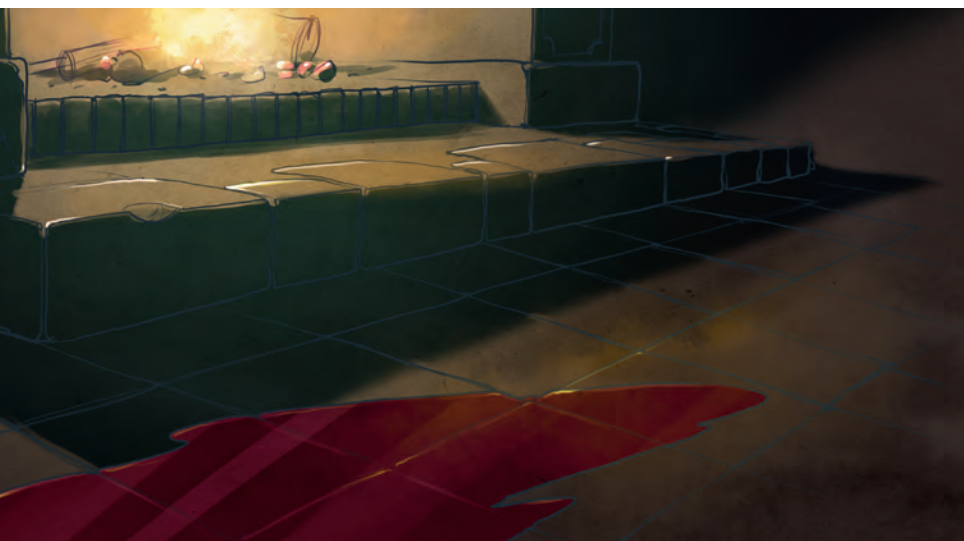
Mrs Umney smiled.

‘It’s the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville. Her husband, Sir Simon de Canterville, murdered her in that exact place in 1575. Sir Simon disappeared nine years later and nobody has ever found his body. But his guilty spirit still haunts Canterville Chase. And nobody can remove the stain.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Washington in a loud voice. “Pinkerton’s Champion Cleaner” will clean it away. It’s the latest American stain remover.’⁵

4. tea : (here) small afternoon meal: cold meat, salad, cakes and cups of tea.

5. stain remover : liquid which takes away marks.



He knelt down and rubbed⁶ the floor with the 'Champion Cleaner'. In a few moments, the blood had disappeared.

'I knew "Pinkerton's" would do it,' he said triumphantly.

At that moment, there was a great flash of lightning and a boom of thunder. They jumped to their feet, and Mrs Umney fainted.⁷

'What a terrible climate,' said Mr Otis calmly, lighting a cigar. 'I'm not surprised that people want to emigrate.'

'My dear husband, look at Mrs Umney,' said his wife. 'What can we do with a housekeeper who faints?'

'We'll reduce her wages,' said Mr Otis. As soon as he said that, Mrs Umney recovered, but she was still very upset.

'Don't laugh at the Ghost, sir. I have seen terrible things in this house.'

However, Mr Otis and his wife told her that they were not afraid of ghosts, and the old housekeeper went to bed.

6. rub : clean by moving the cleaner back and forward

7. faint : lose consciousness.

THINK!

How does Mr Otis feel about the story of the Canterville Ghost? Choose four from a-g. He is:

- a** calm **b** afraid **c** joking **d** unbelieving **e** bored
f unafraid **g** excited

Which one of a-g describes best the feelings of Mrs Umney, the English housekeeper?

The text and beyond • page 52

Values & Feelings • page 78