

GRAVE DESIRES: SEXUAL ALTERITY AND GOTHIC ROMANCE IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE CANTERVILLE GHOST*

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In a short essay titled "The American Invasion" published in *The Court and Society Review* in 1887, Oscar Wilde ponders the sudden proliferation of husband-hungry American women on the London social scene: "For our aristocracy," he wrote, "they have an ardent admiration; they adore titles and are a permanent blow to Republican principles" (qtd Jackson 37).

Wilde's short story *The Canterville Ghost*, published in the same journal a few weeks earlier,¹ contains a heroine who, "in the race for coronets," like the real Americans of Wilde's essay "carries off the prize" (Jackson 39). Virginia Otis is described ironically as both "a little girl" and a horse-race-winning Amazon. She bears a further resemblance to the victims of Wilde's social satire when she enacts a more sympathetic version of his observation that "in America the young are always ready to give to those who are older than themselves the full benefits of their inexperience" (38), for it is Virginia's "inexperience" that releases the Ghost from his absurd purgatory at Canterville Chase and leads to her marriage to the Duke of Cheshire.

The Canterville Ghost belongs to the period of Wilde's writing before his theatrical success. The comic "theatricality" of the story, however, can be traced through to the theatrical satire of his plays. Wilde's first collection of short fiction, *The Happy Prince*, was successful as a book of fairy tales for children. *The Canterville Ghost* was reprinted in his second collection, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891). *The Canterville Ghost* has been popular as a children's story, although it belongs more to the adult mystery genre that he was to develop in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.² Indeed, *The Canterville Ghost* has certain affinities with Wilde's novel: both feature a central male figure whose soul has been separated from his body. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* this is conveyed by means of the portrait as a trope of representation, through which the material and the spiritual, or aesthetic, are divided. In the earlier story, the Ghost leaves behind his ancient, skeletal remains to haunt Canterville Chase, appearing throughout the house in a series of theatrical "performances," or Gothic manifestations. In both texts, the transgressive wandering spirit is finally reunited with its material body where it may be said to "speak," or rather whisper, from beyond the grave. As I will suggest, *The Canterville Ghost* also offers evidence of the homoeroticism that made Wilde's novel so controversial both at the time of its publication and during his trials in 1895.

Wilde subtitled his short story "A Hylo-idealistic Romance,"³ and *The Canterville Ghost* is preoccupied with the concept of Romance in more than one sense. It may be read as the story of the marriage between an untitled heroine and a Duke, or as

¹ *The Court and Society Review* 4.138 (23 Feb 1887): 183-86 and 4.139 (2 Mar 1887): 207-11.

² Originally appearing in the July 1890 edition of the American *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in London by Ward Lock and Co. in 1891.

³ Isobel Murray comments that "a 'hylo-idealistic Romance' is one where a thing is true if you believe it" (8).

the “spiritual” romance between a girl and a ghost. Wilde’s story is also a satire on the “romantic attachment” between America and late nineteenth-century Britain, referring to America’s Gothic romanticisation of the British aristocracy and to the confrontation between British literary Romanticism and the materialism of modern American culture. Its subtitle also alludes to an opposition between the conditions of the material and the sublime; a dualism to neither side of which the ghost of Sir Simon Canterville belongs.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, in Gothic texts “it is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access” (12). Having been imprisoned in a hidden chamber as the punishment for his past crimes, Sir Simon’s spirit is denied access to a grave into which he can quietly descend. Neither body nor soul, his ghost is caught between life and death. Plagued by the Poltergeistian pranks of the Otis boys, who imitate and invert his own ghostly activities, he is too absurd to be thoroughly wicked. The sound of his “celebrated peal of demonic laughter” causes Mrs Otis to offer him cough medicine, observing kindly, “I’m afraid you are far from well” (*Collected Works* 199). The Ghost deplores her “gross materialism,” but when he attempts to put on the suit of armour for which he had been “highly complimented . . . by no less a person than the Virgin Queen,”⁴ he finds himself “completely overpowered” by its weight (199). Hidden in his secret chamber, he grumbles to himself that “never, in a brilliant and uninterrupted career of three hundred years, had he been so grossly insulted” (197) and that “no ghosts in history had ever been treated in this manner” (198). His “spirit” is, as it were, diminished by his failure to seriously offend.

In *The Canterville Ghost* Wilde plays with the clichés of Gothic romance. As the Otis family arrive at the Chase on an otherwise lovely summer evening, “the sky became suddenly overcast with clouds, a curious stillness seemed to hold the atmosphere . . . a great flight of rooks passed silently over their heads” (194). The story treats a number of Gothic conventions ironically, including redemptive love, the visionary romantic quest, allusions to material and immaterial doubles and to the dark family secret. The latter is, in the first instance, represented by the Ghost who, rather than being kept secret, has the full public advantage of being “much admired by tourists and others” (195). A further trope of Gothic Romance, that of the young lovers separated by parental opposition, is represented by Virginia and the Duke of Cheshire who first meet as “children” of fifteen. Wilde’s version is, of course, made laughable by miniaturisation. After his first proposal to Virginia, the little Duke is “sent back to Eton that very night by his guardians in floods of tears” (194). By the end of the story, however, Virginia overcomes the obstacles to their marriage by becoming both a “woman” and an honorary member of the aristocracy after she speaks to the Angel of Death on the Ghost’s behalf.

Regardless of its moments of Victorian sentimentalism, the story is chiefly a Gothic satire in which the Ghost fails to terrorise the new Americans. Rodney Shewan comments that “*The Canterville Ghost* becomes a kind of preposterous parallel to *Northanger Abbey*. Instead of a ghost too few there is one too many: instead of too much ‘sensibility’ there is too little” (33). The American family’s first Gothic encounter occurs when Mrs Otis catches “sight of a dull red stain on the floor by the fireplace.” She is told that the stain was made by the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville “who

⁴ Presumably this is a Wildean joke on tourist mythologies about the houses of the great and famous.

was murdered on the very spot by her own husband, Sir Simon de Canterville in 1575" (195). Sir Simon has disappeared some years later, but his body has never been found. This thrilling tale of murder fails to impress the family. The eldest son, Washington Otis, produces a small black stick, falls on his knees and cries "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent will clean it up in no time" (196). Indeed, at the first application the stain vanishes. Modern American know-how seems to have overcome the traces of British corruption; but a "terrible flash of lightning" causes the housekeeper to faint and the next morning the stain has reappeared. After a third application of Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover again fails to last the night, the Otis family decide that "all doubt about the objective existence of phantasmata were removed for ever" (196).

The Canterville Ghost has received relatively little critical attention. Sigmund Freud referred to it in "The Uncanny," observing that: "Even a real ghost, as in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, loses all power of at least arousing *gruesome* feelings in us as soon as the author begins to amuse himself by being ironical about it" (252). Critics such as Shewan, Christopher Nassar and Isobel Murray refer to the story in the context of more general studies of Wilde's work. More recently, Lydia Reineck Willburn has discussed it in terms of Wilde's references to Dante's *Inferno* and Sir Simon Canterville's need of an audience for his ghostly crimes. The Ghost is, of course, denied the pleasures of horrifying his audience by the unshakeable new inhabitants of his ancient abode. Instead, the American children parody the Ghost's cherished catalogue of horrors with a series of childish pranks; throwing pillows, shooting peas and inflicting their own theatrical display upon him by constructing an artificial ghost to give him a fright.

The incursion of the American invention in its various forms is the most serious cause of offence to the Ghost. Not content with attempting to erase the stain of his first evil deed, Hiram B. Otis, the American minister who buys Canterville Chase, fearlessly complains about the Ghost's clanking chains and manacles: "I really must insist on your oiling those chains and have brought you for that purpose a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. It is said to be completely efficacious upon one application" (197). The Reverend Otis's attempt to make the Ghost socially acceptable blithely misses the point of the clanking heavy metal. Previously warned of Sir Simon's existence, he remarks: "I come from a modern country, where we have everything that money can buy . . . I reckon that if there were such as thing as a ghost in Europe, we'd have it at home in a very short time in one of our public museums" (193). Once the Ghost makes its presence felt, Reverend Otis accepts its existence without a tremor, meanwhile attempting to make Sir Simon as invisible as possible.

In the face of the Otis family's relentless humanism the Ghost begins to lose faith in himself. Suddenly plagued by the remnants of his corporeality after three hundred years of horrible hauntings he barks his shins, catches cold and falls into traps set by Washington's twin brothers. As the Ghost, Sir Simon continues to act out his sublime spectacle of horror, but repeatedly fails to shatter the literalism of the modern American family. Refusing to be cowed by his monstrosity, the Otises continue to erase his traces from the scene, as they also attempt to erase the "stain" of aristocracy from the British hearth. These gestures of erasure attempt to claim the egalitarian New World as superior to the Old World of the British aristocracy. This is treated ironically at the conclusion when the daughter of the house, Virginia Otis, is captured first by the Ghost,

the chief representative of Old World values, and then by the royal Duke of Cheshire. This is ironised in turn, however, when Virginia asserts her modern independence by keeping an “old world” secret of her own. The Ghost enables her to escape the confines of Victorian feminine identity as a form of innocent childhood, just as she frees him from his own imprisoning identity by helping him to escape the Gothic space in which his identity can only be posited in terms of horror.

As a figure of alterity, the Ghost belongs neither to polite Victorian imperialism nor to American consumer evangelism. He is, further, separated from the binary structure of heterosexual Romance, in which he participates only as a representational figure of desire. As a desiring subject, the Ghost takes pleasure in creating terror in the living. This, however, appears to make him absurdly “unspeakable” and excludes him from family life. His exclusion from the social community raises the question of the Ghost’s positioning as a possible figure of sexual alterity; just as Oscar Wilde was positioned as a figure of social unspeakability within the context of late-nineteenth-century Victorian London during and following his trials. Ed Cohen has discussed the intertextuality of Wilde’s life and writing, with particular reference to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while attempting to avoid a “crude biographical” connection. Cohen argues that “at issue was the discursive production of ‘the homosexual’ as the antithesis of the ‘true’ bourgeois male” (805).

Questions of speaking and silence may have a particular resonance in relation to this story in the context of Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem about “the love that dare not speak its name,” which Wilde was to invoke in the bitter and impassioned letter he wrote to Douglas from Reading Gaol in 1895, now known as *De Profundis*.⁵ In this sense, the Gothic family secret in *The Canterville Ghost* takes on a slightly different perspective. The removal of the mark of blood upon the flagstones of Canterville family history may therefore be a strategy of sanitation, a means of attempting to remove the Ghost from the narrative of Romance. It is, however, the Ghost’s secret and “uncanny” longing for death that makes him truly frightening when, near its conclusion, death threatens to overcome the story’s comic condition as a modern Gothic Romance.

The sense of the Ghost’s singular “difference” is intensified by the proliferation of narrative “doubles,” a familiar Gothic trope. The Otis twins, affectionately known as the Stars and Stripes, are an obvious twist on the figure of the double. Wilde also plays “doubles” with class by having his wealthy American bourgeoisie buy into the British aristocracy. The idea of the double is, moreover, clearly extended through the representatives of the two nations, America and Britain, joined at the end in the marriage between Virginia and the Duke. Wilde was, of course, to develop this theme in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where “the terrible pleasure of a double life” (210) is explored through the two representations—body and image—of its central character, in Dorian’s relationships with other men, in numerous motifs of reflection and imitation and through the novel’s subtext of same-sex desire. In Wilde’s novel other characters also possess an alter ego, a simulacrum of the other that nevertheless appears authentic.

The problem of authenticity is one that also arises in *The Canterville Ghost* where the most intriguing example of a “double” is that of the fake ghost which, I

⁵ The last lines from Douglas’s poem “Two Loves,” reads: “Then sighing said the other, ‘Have thy will, / I am the Love that dare not speak its name.’” This is cited in the relevant note in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Hart-Davis 441).

suggest, may be read as a manifestation of an unanswered homoerotic desire. Wilde's story contains a series of possibly homoerotic puns: this literal spectre of same-sex desire; the indelible stain by the fireplace; the chain that needs to be greased; and even the boy on his knees brandishing his little black stick of Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover. Indeed, the Ghost has a history of playing the game of doubles on his own terms; proudly recalling that the young Duke's grand-uncle, "Lord Francis Stilton, had once bet a hundred guineas with Colonel Carbury that he would play dice with the Canterville ghost, and was found the next morning lying on the floor of the card-room . . . never able to say anything again but 'Double Sixes'" (205).

Propelled by this monstrous history, Sir Simon prowls through the dark passages of the house making desperate plans to frighten the Otis family, while "the owl beat against the window panes, the raven croaked from the old yew-tree" and "the moon hid her face in a cloud" (200). As he approaches the bedrooms, however, he is forestalled by "a horrible spectre" (201). "Never having seen a ghost before," Wilde comments, "he naturally was terribly frightened." What the Ghost sees is this: "Its head was bald and burnished; its face round, and fat, and white." Its face is contorted with "hideous laughter" and "from the eyes streamed rays of scarlet light," while "a garment, like to his own, swathed with its silent snows the Titan form" (201). Sir Simon gets carried away, here, with the poetry of desire for a terror that can be received rather than instilled. At this point, he does what he had hoped the Otis children would do in the face of his intended performance of "Dumb Daniel or the Suicide's Skeleton." He runs back to his room and hides his face under the bed-clothes. The dreadful fascination of encountering another "ghost" is, nevertheless, too strong an attraction to resist. Returning to greet the "other" spectre properly, he assures himself that "two ghosts were better than one," especially when grappling with twins (201).

Steven Bruhm identifies the "Gothic body" as "that which is put on excessive display" (xvii). The Ghost here encounters a "Gothic body" in whom he believes he recognises a being similar to himself. The fake Ghost is laughable, but briefly uncanny to the Ghost because it is both strange and familiar. Even more disturbing, as the Ghost discovers, his alter-ego is nothing more than a collection of material objects. Its materiality may be said to "exceed" the boundaries of ghostly existence. On his return to the haunted passage, the Ghost sees that his compatriot is a much diminished creature, "for the light had entirely faded from its hollow eyes." In a moment of anguish he rushes forward and seizes the "ghost" in his arms, but discovers that he is embracing a hollow turnip, a broom, a candle and a curtain. Overcome by his persecution, the Ghost returns to his room, humiliated and exhausted by so much "terrible excitement" (202). As with Dorian Gray, Wilde's later Gothic hero, the Ghost looks into the mirror of himself and sees only the empty horror of representation.

This transformation of the "other" spectre into common household objects tricks the Ghost into self-recognition and he falls into a decline, even doubting the authenticity of his transgressive desire to haunt the Chase. From this point on, he is virtually silenced, and avoids disturbing the human inhabitants by using the Rising Sun Lubricator so as to slip past them unnoticed. As Willburn remarks, the "Americans have evoked a potential space where the Ghost must define himself anew" (48). The Gothic themes in this text are thus reframed in terms of comic satire, just as the sub-theme of the Ghost's homoeroticism may be said to give way to the narrative conventions of Romance.

Sedgwick argues that “the Gothic novel crystallised for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots” (*Between Men* 92). It was not until the late-nineteenth century, however, that “a comparable body of homosexual thematics” emerged (92). *The Canterville Ghost* does not deal as overtly with homoerotic themes as, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the central image of the portrait may be read as a trope of homoerotic desire. The interchange between the two manifestations of the supernatural, one rendered as absurd, the other a simulacrum, does, nevertheless, invite speculation about the subtext of an, at least, homosocial desire.

Homoerotic paranoia is manifested in *The Canterville Ghost* as resistance to social and possibly sexual difference. This is exhibited by the Americans as inverted patronage: they accept the presence of the Ghost but refuse to take his manifestations seriously. As a Ghost, and as a spectre of same-sex attraction, Sir Simon occupies a liminal social space from which he expresses his antagonism to American middle-class family values. His secret longing for death further identifies him as a desiring “other” and, briefly, renders him uncanny. This uncanniness, however, becomes relocated in the story when Virginia Otis traverses the space from childhood into womanhood via her descent into the Stygian “Gothic space” of an invisible purgatory. Virginia’s momentary break with the normal boundaries of human, social existence demonstrates Sedgwick’s remark that “the most characteristic energies” of Gothic fiction “are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall. . . . The barrier between the self and what should belong to it can be caused by anything and nothing; but only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them” (*Coherence* 13).

Sedgwick’s observations elsewhere about the role of class and sexual identity are also relevant for Wilde’s story. Sedgwick comments, for example, that compared with the middle class, “the feminization of the aristocracy” made “the entire class” seem “ethereal, decorative and otiose” (*Between Men* 93). It is not possible, in the context of this paper, to consider closely the way in which Sir Simon Canterville is re-gendered as a figure of alterity in terms of the aristocratic feminine. It does seem to me, however, that what Sedgwick refers to as a “cluster of associations” provides Wilde with a link between the homoerotic and the Gothic in a way that enables him to satirise and transcend the homosexual as uncanny.

Once his spectacular exploits are seen as laughable, Sir Simon Canterville cannot remain a source of horror. His identity as a spectral “other” is, instead, treated with pathos and put to rest. The Ghost’s resignation may be read as the triumph of realism and heterosexuality. On the other hand, his desire for “release” permits him to be recognised, by the potential New Woman and appropriately named Virginia Otis. At the climax of the story, the Ghost seeks acceptance and forgiveness by begging Virginia to go down with him into the underworld to speak to the “Angel,” a mysterious figure of masculine potency. From here, Sir Simon leads Virginia through the grave of his last, most potent desire, from which she emerges transformed by the knowledge that “Love” can transcend the binary opposition of Life or Death.

In relation to the conclusion of the story, Shewan argues that “the hylo-idealist” of the sub-title “is Virginia who rescues the Ghost from his purgatory by believing in him” (33). In a thematic overview of Wilde’s work, Nassar sees the story as one in which a “higher” innocence transcends the demonic. The “innocent” Americans, in this

reading, remain blissfully unaware of the ghost's evil nature, refusing "to recognise the demonic or to treat it seriously" (Nassar 21); all except Virginia, who "opens herself to the full experience of the demonic," thus achieving a "higher innocence" (21). This is symbolised, Nassar suggests, by the little casket of jewels that she brings back from the underworld.

I favour a more playful reading of Wilde's story in which knowledge and innocence are not so simply divided. Little Virginia takes the ghost seriously, perhaps, because she is the only one in the family who "knows" that the Ghost repairs the bloodstain from her set of water-colours and not from any other mystical source. As the Ghost remarks "it is a very difficult thing to get real blood nowadays" (206). In another sense, however, the Ghost does obtain blood from Virginia's body when he takes her out of the realm of childhood, enabling her to become a woman and making her eligible to marry the Duke at the end of the story.

In Shewan's view of the ending the renewed stain on the hearth is partly the trace of Sir Simon's secret meeting with the Angel of Death, during which he "steals" the blood of Virginia's virginity by seducing her behind her fiancé's back and leaving another kind of stain of his own. In this scenario, the Ghost continues to haunt successive generations in a completely new sense. To quote from Shewan's summation, "the conclusion is the feminist's answer" to Wilde's earlier story, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, where the husband keeps his "crime" secret from his wife. In *The Canterville Ghost*, as Shewan puts it, "the wife 'sacrifices' herself and keeps the details from her husband" (35).⁶

The blood on the hearth, a symbol of liminality through which Lady Eleanore has passed into death three hundred years earlier, is also, however, the mark of Virginia's menstruation. She thus becomes the involuntary source of the Ghost's artistry, the means with which he inscribes his identity and his desire for transformation. At the same time, Virginia is the symbolic "author" who is able to write the ghost out of the script of his unhappy existence. Virginia may, therefore, be seen as an evolved heroine of Romance, an unchained New Woman who is able to leave her Gothic private chamber and enter the public world of adult life.

In her discussion of Gothic conventions, Sedgwick points out that "the marking with blood of veils and other surfaces" is referential: "both kinds, that is, have important though incomplete similarities to written language" (*Coherence* 142). As a metaphor for Virginia's maturation, the blood on the hearth is partly a breach of both childhood and modesty. It is also another kind of breach, however, since the metaphor of menstruation becomes, here, a metaphor for language. This linguistic breach is enacted when Virginia speaks for the Ghost to the Angel of Death, returning him to an imagined new kind of human community. Her experience potentially transforms Virginia's own role as an adult and as a "speaking" woman. As Willburn puts it, "she has become an artist of the self"; as a recasting of Dante's Beatrice, she "even usurps Dante's role when she returns to the others with her new vision" (51). Virginia's new vision is, however, one of a desire that remains at odds with social convention.

⁶ Shewan's comment seems to indicate a somewhat hostile, or at least a 'Victorian,' view of feminism: but Virginia is a protean New Woman, I suggest, because she heroically pursues a Romantic quest and transcends convention to attain forgiveness and justice, rather than because she successfully deceives her husband.

In her discussion of Gothic fiction, Susan Wolstenholme refers to Freud's view that a woman's gaze and a woman's sex "are both uncanny . . . suggesting a terrible power over men" (10). In this sense, Virginia is transformed as the true figure of alterity in this story, a radical "other" who wants to do what nobody else will do and refuses to tell anyone else about it. Her silence may seem somewhat problematic as a source of her sexual power, since the space she negotiates remains hidden territory. In this sense, Virginia's mythic journey with the Ghost becomes a locus of ambiguity, an aporia that remains "unspeakable" within the text. Her experience with the Ghost is indescribable because, within the narrative convention of Romance, desire can only be acknowledged if it fits into the binary paradigm of bourgeois Anglo-American family life. The desire that Virginia witnesses, I suggest, is not that of the Ghost for her, but of the Ghost for the Angel of Death himself. The stain, like the possibly phallic chain that needs to be greased, may be evidence of something else altogether: an anterior desire that has been confined for centuries, with the skeleton of Sir Simon Canterville, to a dark space within the English Gothic mansion.

After her ordeal, Virginia leads the family to the place where Sir Simon has been chained to the wall by his wife's vengeful brothers and left to die; she never reveals, however, what has passed between herself and the Ghost. As in Stella Gibbon's *Cold Comfort Farm*, another Gothic parody, the secret of "what really happened" is never told. Virginia returns to her new world of adulthood, barely a decade from the American century, with the little casket of Canterville jewels presented to her by the Ghost as thanks for his release. These family jewels bestow a form of aristocratic lineage, providing Virginia with the "spiritual," rather than the economic means of marrying her beloved Duke. The question of whether these are to be read, however, as the jewels of Love or of Virginitly, as the romantic seal between ancient and modern, as the material means of obtaining an aristocratic husband, or as the reward of innocent courage, must be left open.

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