The Serious and The Frivolous: Parodic and Thematic Dualities of Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost"

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Abstract: This paper examines Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" as his multi-layered satirical commentary on Anglo-American cultural tensions and on Victorian and Elizabethan patriarchy, as well as his critique of what he perceived as Victorian moral superficiality. As the story remains under-read, the existing critical approaches focus narrowly on its feminist or religious dimensions. This paper offers a new critical perspective by paying equal attention to the cultural tension between the British aristocratic traditionalism and American pragmatism-cum-expansionism. It does so through a literary analysis conducted in the context of historical research with regard to feminist conclusions. It demonstrates how, through the character of the ghost, Wilde portrays British aristocracy as theatrically entrapped in obsolete customs and values, while the Otis family embodies the no-nonsense practicality and pragmatism of a rising industrial powerhouse. It also shows how Virginia Otis serves as a vehicle for Wilde's proto-feminist critique of both Elizabethan and Victorian patriarchal social structures and how she subverts traditional gender roles not through an open rebellion but through her emotional intelligence, courage, and compassion. This paper also examines the way Wilde reimagines the Christian doctrine of salvation by replacing the theological framework of sin, repentance, and divine judgment with a model rooted in empathy and emotional connection. This vision of redemption mirrors Wilde's ambivalence towards organised religion, shaped, on the one hand, by his fascination with Catholic ritual and, on the other hand, by his lifelong struggle to reconcile aesthetics, moral freedom, and religious sensibility.

Keywords: The Canterville Ghost, Oscar Wilde, salvation, patriarchy, American pragmatism

Introduction

Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost" is a masterful parody that cleverly intertwines humour with conventions of the traditional ghost story. This paper explores

how Wilde's use of parody operates on two levels: first, as a humorous critique of the social and cultural concerns of his time, and second, as a serious narrative tool to reimagine the Christian doctrine of salvation and to challenge traditional Victorian gender roles. To determine the exact sources of parodic frivolity and the serious concerns of Wilde's narrative, this paper takes into consideration his religious beliefs as well as his allusions to the socioeconomic realities of both late sixteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Britain and nineteenth-century America.

While considerable critical attention has been devoted to Wilde's essays, tales, and his only novel, "The Canterville Ghost" remains comparatively under-read. Existing studies tend to concentrate on its critique of the Victorian institution of marriage or its commentary on the patriarchal objectification of women. However, few focus specifically on the story's satirical critique of the British-American relations and their satirical characterisation. This paper addresses that critical gap, drawing on historical and cultural research on the United States and Great Britain, as well as existing analyses of "The Canterville Ghost" carried out in the context of its representation of the rigid patriarchal structures.

It presents "The Canterville Ghost" as a subversion of the traditional ghost story, pointing to the gothic elements that the author has comically twisted. It also refers to the socioeconomic realities of nineteenth-century America and late sixteenth-century British aristocracy to outline the story's ideological context. Through this contextual conjunction, the paper presents how all the characters emerge as symbolic embodiments of the historical attitudes and behaviours Wilde seeks to critique. It also shows how he reinvents the idea of salvation to create a doctrine where salvation does not stem from the divine judgment but from human compassion. Drawing on the work of Maureen O'Connor and Marija Milosavljević, the paper further explores Wilde's jabs at the Victorian unease with female sexuality and his critique of the traditional Victorian gender roles.

American Pragmatism Meets Tradition

As befits the convention of the proper ghost story, the whole action of "The Canterville Ghost" takes place in Britain, at home. But this is where its generic predictability ends. Its characters are from abroad, and its American heroine travels in time. The story is set in the stately house that has remained, for centuries, in the possession of Lord Canterville. Its action, however, starts when the mysterious mansion is bought by a pragmatic American minister. Indeed, this

ghost story, published for the first time in 1887, is imagined to be happening in the times of the great American growth. In the nineteenth century, the United States grew in terms of population, economy, and size starting with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which, as asserted in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "doubled the size of the United States, greatly strengthened the country materially and strategically, provided a powerful impetus to westward expansion, and confirmed the doctrine of implied powers of the federal Constitution" (Volle 2023).

The mentality of its citizens was shaped by the idea of American exceptionalism, which proposed "that the United States of America is a unique and even morally superior country for historical, ideological, or religious reasons" (Volle 2023). The term is believed to be derived from the works of Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that "the position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" (Tocqueville 2013, 55). The belief of American exceptionalism was further reinforced by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which emerged prominently in the mid-nineteenth century and held that Americans were divinely ordained to expand across the North American continent, spreading their values, beliefs, and institutions. "The expansion was deemed to be not only good but also obvious ('manifest') and certain ('destiny')" ("Manifest Destiny" 2022). The nation's industrial boom, referred to by some as the Second Industrial Revolution, positioned the United States as a global leader in innovation and production. The philosophy of pragmatism—emphasising practicality, progress, and the utility of ideas, materialism, and realism—were deeply rooted in the American identity during this era of rapid expansion and industrial growth.

Then, even though "The Canterville Ghost" is set in England, its narrative serves as a satirical commentary on the values and attitudes brought over by its American characters. The Otis family, representing the industrial expansionist mindset of nineteenth-century America, moved into the ancient British mansion with their strictly down-to-earth and practical outlook. Their rejection of the supernatural and their pragmatic attitude towards the mysterious are epitomised by their rejection of the ghost's very existence and later by the lack of fear they exhibit towards him. This down-to-earth mindset parallels the pragmatic American ethos, where belief is often inferior to what is useful or rational. As emphasised by Mr Otis, "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" (Wilde

2019, 4). The materialist underpinnings of nineteenth-century America, shaped by industrial growth and mechanisation, shine through the family's confidence that any problem, even a supernatural one, can be solved with ingenuity and modern products. This is humorously illustrated during Mr Otis's very first interaction with Sir Simon of Canterville when he offers the ghost a bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to fix his chains, which can be read as a symbolic representation of American belief in practical solutions as superior to British traditions.

The Otis family embody a modern, no-nonsense attitude that clashes with the centuries-old customs and mystique of Canterville Chase, the customs which they disregard. Their American expansionism shows in situations as simple as the dispute over a blood stain on the carpet in Chase's living room. For the British, the stain is an important symbol of the mansion's dark history that must be respected, while the new owners are determined that it must be removed at once, as it contravenes their sense of what is aesthetic. This power struggle between two nations can be read as a metaphor for the American westward expansion of the nineteenth century, where the push for progress and dominance came at the expense of the existing traditions and cultures. The idea of Manifest Destiny has justified the appropriation of land and resources in the name of progress and liberty, just as the Otis family seeks to reshape Canterville Chase to fit their values and aesthetics.

British Aristocratic Tradition Clashes with Modernity

While Mr Otis is a representative figure of his progressive and pragmatic times, firmly rooted in the ideals of late nineteenth-century American modernity, Sir Simon de Canterville stands as a relic of the past, entrapped in the bygone era. As he confesses to Virginia Otis during one of their conversations: "For three hundred years I have not slept, and I am so tired" (Wilde 2019, 46). It is evident that Sir Simon still belongs to the rigid social structures and customs of the English aristocracy of the late sixteenth century. Even though Wilde never specifies his exact age at the moment of his death, Mrs Umney, the housekeeper, reveals part of Sir Simon's story, saying that he murdered his wife in 1575 and was himself murdered nine years later by the wife's vengeful brothers, which places his passing around 1584. At the time of his demise, Sir Simon was already married and firmly established in his role as the master of Canterville Chase; he must have already been a middle-aged man in the Elizabethan era. It was a time of great development, cultural and economic growth, change, and exploration, prompted by technological

advancements; yet it was also a time of great fascination with the mystical and supernatural. "Elements of religion and magic formed an integral part of the fabric of Elizabethan society, infusing it with a sense of wonder, mystery, and spiritual exploration" ("Shakespeare in Context" 2023), which sharply contrasts with the practical and pragmatic mindset of nineteenth-century American society.

The Elizabethan society was divided into four social classes: the nobility, the gentry, the yeomen, and the poor. While Wilde does not openly state whether Sir Simon represents nobility of the gentry, it is the gentry to which the ghost most probably belongs. Unlike the nobility, whose status was derived from their ancient titles and political authority, the gentry were defined primarily by their ownership of land, which "supported their gentrification, in that they didn't need to toil in manual labour, enjoying passive wealth from their assets and estates". This condition "gave rise to the term Landed Gentry" ("What is Landed Gentry?" 2021). Sir Simon's position as the master of Canterville Chase, a large estate passed down through generations, is characteristic of the landed gentry, who held significant wealth and social influence. Similarly, his title indicates knighthood and thus points to this social class, as members of the gentry were typically knights, squires or gentlemen. Hence Wilde, having created a parodic image of an aristocrat hopelessly clinging to outdated ideals of honour and desperately trying to exert dominance over his mansion even after his death, in fact, parodies the high society's obsession with status, honour, and performance.

Sir Simon's persistent adherence to his role as a spectre indicates the gentry's inability to adapt. They are portrayed as relics of a bygone era, frantically performing for an audience that has already lost all interest in the act. His elaborate costumes, scaring techniques and dramatic recollections of the past hauntings in which he performed "The Strangled Babe", "Gaunt Gibeon", and "The Bloodsucker of Bexley Moor" (Wilde 2019, 18) – suggest that he views haunting as a form of art, reflecting Elizabethan preoccupation with theatricality and the Jacobean taste for masques. Wilde also pokes fun at the sixteenth-century British obsession with the supernatural by creating an image of the British as seen through the eyes of nineteenth-century Americans and humorously exposes the absurdity of a social class clinging to rituals that no longer hold much meaning in a modern, industrialised world. As for the matter of honour, for the gentry it was not simply pride – to use Anthony Fletcher's words – "their reputation was the very essence of their ability to govern" (1985, 115). Wilde turns this aristocratic dignity into a source of comedy, as Sir Simon's increasingly desperate attempts

to maintain authority result only in repeated humiliation, ultimately stripping him of both dignity and ghostly powers. His haunting career is not simply a matter of evoking dread but a performance of aristocratic superiority and a forceful continuation of his role as the master of Canterville Chase. However, when met with modern, down-to-earth Americans, his efforts become entirely futile. Instead of inspiring fear, he becomes the subject of ridicule, reduced to a powerless figure desperately attempting to assert his position in a world that no longer respects him. Wilde, quite seriously, utilises the modern American perspective to critique the British aristocracy's failure to evolve beyond the traditions they so desperately hold onto. Mr Otis functions as a foil to Sir Simon's Britishness. While the Americans are flexible, efficient and forward-thinking, Sir Simon is inflexible and nostalgic, relentlessly striving to restore the infamous bloodstain each morning, despite Mrs Otis's tireless efforts to scrub it away.

Subverting Elizabethan Patriarchy

Apart from the preoccupation with social status, what prevailed in the Elizabethan era was patriarchy. As noted by Lawrence Stone, "there is evidence to suggest that a trend towards greater patriarchy in husband-wife relations was also developing in the sixteenth century" (1995, 136). While the gender division was not always so apparent in the lower social classes, the English aristocracy placed men in positions of authority while relegating women to submission. Women's most desirable traits were obedience and faithfulness, as reflected in their letters, habitually finished with words: "your faithful and obedient wife" (Stone 1995, 139). Emotional distance was the norm within aristocratic households, and marital relations were often transactional rather than affectionate. As explicated by Stone:

> In the sixteenth century, relations between spouses in rich families were often fairly remote. Living in big houses, each with his or her own bedroom and servants, husband and wife were primarily members of a functioning social universe of a large household and were rarely in private together. (1995, 81)

Matrimony for love was uncommon, and arranged marriages, based on the objective of amassing wealth and advancing to a higher social class, prevailed. Wilde parodies this strict patriarchal structure by subverting it entirely. Sir Simon,

who stands as a relic of the oppressive system and "murdered his wife for not meeting the oppressive gendered expectations as a woman, wife, or homemaker" (Ponciano 2025, 81), is not aided in his misery by another man, but, instead, he finds salvation through a young woman. Her role in freeing him from his eternal torment directly undermines the Elizabethan expectation that only men should wield power and authority. Unlike the distant and transactional relationships of Elizabethan families, Virginia approaches Sir Simon with genuine compassion, contradicting the cold atmosphere of the sixteenth-century home. Her kindness, sacrifice, and bravery completely challenge the rigid patriarchal values dictating women's roles. Wilde's decision to grant Virginia, and not any man, the agency to break the ancient curse subverts the outdated structures of Elizabethan-cum-Victorian patriarchy, highlighting its irrelevance in a changing world.

Victorian Gender Roles and Transactional Marriages

As the narrative unfolds, the story's tone shifts from light-hearted and comedic to solemn and contemplative; and as the tone changes, so does the main subject of parody: the story makes a leap from past to present, focusing not on the Ghost but on Otis's daughter, and with her, on Victorian England. The humorous critique of the socially specific standards gives way to the themes of religion, Christianity, and salvation. The critique of patriarchy prevails but, focuses on a different period. To Wilde critics, his feminist sympathies are not novel: his views on gender roles are apparent in many of his works, including his plays. As noted by Marija Milosavljević, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Lady Windermere's Fan and Salomé* all feature female characters and themes relevant to the domains of research of feminist literary theory including relationships between men and women, marriage, the complexity of female characters, their treatment in literature, gender roles and how they are portrayed" (2021, 227). Specifically in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "Wilde satirized the gender roles of the Victorian society and how men had power over women and their choices" (Milosavljević 2021, 227). Similar critique is visible in *The Canterville Ghost*, published the same year, "in which Wilde embarked on an important phase in the development of the consistently proto-feminist cultural critique" (O'Connor 2004, 332). Wilde's feminist sympathies were visible when he assumed the role of an editor of *The Lady's World*. Declan Kiberd observes that "Wilde's first act on taking up the Lady's World in 1887 was to rename it *Woman's World*, and in his

plays, he argued for those feminine qualities deemed irrelevant to a thrusting industrial society" (1998, 19). However, it would be rather a stretch to attribute purely feminist views to all of Wilde's works. Jarlath Killeen states,

> Oscar Wilde has recently been appropriated by feminist scholars in two distinct ways. On the one hand, he is read as a proto-feminist writer, with feminist sympathies, whose editorial work publicised many women writers, and who publicly supported the causes of female education, especially to university level, female suffrage, and female participation in the workplace. However, many others have pointed out that despite this, there remains a powerful and important level of extreme misogyny running throughout his work. (2004, 46)

Wilde, as he suggests, simultaneously holds up women as potential societal transformers and as angels of the home – a role that, while empowering in one sense, also reinforces patriarchal constraints (Kileen 2004, 56).

The first clear indication of the theme of Victorian gender roles in "The Canterville Ghost" arises in the very situation that brought the Otis family to England and then led to their purchase of Canterville Chase. While the precise reason for their relocation is not specified, what is known is that Virginia, despite her young age, is engaged to Cecil, the Duke of Cheshire. This union mirrors the social reality of Victorian Britain. As Victoria Howard points out, "As the 19th century ended, the great aristocratic families of Britain began to struggle. A number disappeared, ruined by their expensive lifestyles, and the depression in agriculture – an estate's lifeblood – while others clung on for dear life" (2015). The rescue came from abroad in the form of American heiresses, who would marry into the British aristocracy to exchange their wealth for social status. These women, commonly known as "Dolar Princesses", entered purely transactional marriages. Such exchanges were profitable for both parties as "upon marriage, the Victorian brides relinquished all rights to property and personal wealth to their husbands" (Nsaidzedze 2017, 1). This is a topic Wilde also addressed directly in his essays "The American Invasion" and "The American Man". While Virginia is not explicitly labelled a "Dolar Princess" in the story, the socioeconomic context and Wilde's feminist interests indicate so. The engagement between Virginia Otis and the Duke of Cheshire serves as both a mirror and a critique of these transactional relationships. However, Wilde complicates the traditional dynamic through Virginia's character. Unlike a typical

Victorian woman, passive and subordinate, she is portrayed as autonomous and courageous. Moreover, she is the most rational member of the Otis family. Wilde does not, however, strip her of her softness, love, and compassion, traditionally regarded as feminine features but rather reclaims them as the sources of strength. This blend of traits forms a deliberate stylistic strategy. As observed by O'Connor, "Wilde continues to deploy these modes traditionally codified as feminine. His stylistic engagement with feminised discourses in this story, as elsewhere in his work, is a deliberately dissident strategy, an adaptation of 'feminine' rhetoric as a means of affronting masculinist imperatives of orthodoxy and order" (2004, 331). Wilde's skilful combination of seemingly opposite character traits results in Virginia regaining her autonomy and overcoming the perceived weakness associated with stereotypically feminine features.

Innocence, Sexuality, and Women's Agency in "The Canterville Ghost"

Another trope that Wilde subverts is the stereotypical linking of women to sexuality and the cultural preoccupation with their purity. In Victorian reality, women's roles were often reduced to those of homemakers and child bearers, and their intellectuality was suppressed under a veil of enforced innocence. The fifteen-year-old Virginia is repeatedly referred to as "little"; however, she is stripped of her innocence through the extramundane journey with Sir Simon. Although she is not physically forced to face the Angel of Death, she lacks true agency, as not only a prophecy states that she must do so, but once she agrees, "she is physically impelled forward by the ghost" (O'Connor 2004, 336), eliminating the possibility of changing her mind. The fact that Wilde uses the relationship between Virginia and the Ghost to satirize the cultural preoccupation with women's purity becomes evident in Virginia's parent's reaction to her disappearance: "Mr Otis goes in search of local gypsies he suspects have kidnapped his daughter, a suspicion which all but explicitly raises the possibility of rape" (O'Connor 2004, 336). After her return, Virginia is transformed, which is symbolised by the blooming of the graveyard almond tree. Her innocence is gone as, metaphorically speaking, she "has given birth to death" (O'Connor 2004, 336) and is substituted by emotional maturity.

These themes have recently been reconsidered by Regina M. Ponciano in her article "Haunting the In-Between: Gender and Genre in Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost'", where she argues that the story's seemingly comedic surface

masks a disturbing undercurrent of gender violence. Drawing on O'Connor's earlier analysis, Ponciano highlights how Sir Simon's confession of murdering his wife for failing to perform traditional domestic duties reveals the normalisation of patriarchal brutality through a tone that remains flippant and comedic. As O'Connor observes, "the unconscious-seeming ease with which wife-murder can facilitate comedy is a devastating indictment", a point that Ponciano uses to challenge any comfortable reading of Wilde's tone as merely satirical (quoted in Ponciano 2025, 85). This reading deepens the feminist implications of Virginia's role by suggesting that her transformation comes at the cost of an experience that is "gothically unspeakable" and perhaps even traumatic.

The satirical commentary on sexuality and purity continues in the story's last section. Even years after the incident, Virginia's husband continues to press her about what happened during her disappearance. There is implicit sexual jealousy in his words: "You never told me what happened to you when you were locked up with the ghost" (Wilde 2019, 71). But despite Duke's relentlessness, "Virginia is finally allowed to maintain possession of her own story. She is not mastered by her husband's will to know and to read her" (O'Connor 2004, 337), and she never reveals the truth, nor does Wilde. Indeed, his work deftly uses satire to critique the gender expectations of its double, the Elizabethan and Victorian eras. Through Virginia, Wilde questions the sexualisation of female innocence and the objectification of women in marriage. However, Ponciano argues that Virginia is both elevated and constrained by the narrative, interpreting the silence surrounding her disappearance not as an empowering act of agency but as a moment steeped in ambiguity and discomfort. The text's refusal to narrate what occurs during her absence, combined with her physical transformation and the family's fears of sexual violence, positions Virginia in a liminal space between victimhood and sainthood. By highlighting "the condensations of multiple identities" within Virginia's character, Ponciano asserts that the story "situates Virginia at the intersection of times, places, and identities", thereby deliberately complicating "any readings of her as active or passive, radical or reactive, feminist or traditionalist" (2025, 87).

The Concept of Salvation Reimagined

Returning agency to the female protagonist, proposing a subversive image of women (as formed from within patriarchal structures), Wilde also offers insight into his private theology. His relationship with faith was complex and often

contradictory. Raised in the spirit of Protestantism, Wilde, against his father's wishes, developed a fascination with Catholicism. As stated by Noel O'Mahony:

> Wilde's interest in Catholicism dates from his student days at Trinity College. There is evidence that he sometimes attended Catholic services and that he was friendly with some priests, probably in Gardiner Street. Unhappily, his father, Sir William, though a great surgeon and antiquary, was also a great religious bigot and would not have countenanced any such interest in his son had he known about it. He did make it a condition in his will that Oscar was not to inherit property in the West of Ireland if he abandoned Protestantism. (1951, 27)

Contrary to his father's will, Wilde grew more and more fond of "the beauty of the Church's ritual" (O'Mahony 1951, 27). Despite this fascination, he did not decide to convert until his very deathbed, when he received the Catholic sacraments less than 24 hours before dying of meningitis. His ambivalence towards religion stemmed from the conflict between his personal life and conduct, on the one hand, and traditional Christian doctrine, on the other. As John Allen Quintus explains, "Wilde could reject Christianity and embrace atheism or any religious position that countenanced his behaviour and freed him of religious scruples regarding his mode of life" (1991, 514). This led to him being perceived by scholars "as someone caught in a dilemma, someone almost immobilised at times between 'pagan' pleasure and religious conscience" (Quintus 1991, 514). Even when engaging with Christianity, he selectively embraced elements that resonated with his aesthetic and moral philosophy: "Wilde, therefore, distinguished between Christians and Christ, between the human institution that by fiat upholds Christian teaching and the fountainhead of this institution" (Quintus 1991, 515). For Wilde, Christ was not so much a son of God but an ideal person who embraced freedom, fully realising his potential, "the arch-enemy of convention, the Man whose life was a poem" (O'Mahony 1951, 29) and "a 'released' man, who was free from trammels of social convention" (Quintus 1991, 515). This approach might have been his way of easing his conscience, allowing him to reconcile his pursuit of individual freedom with the moral weight of religious tradition. Wilde's religious beliefs greatly influenced his literary works, including "The Canterville Ghost", where religion is parodied not to be rejected or mocked but to be reimagined. As put by Joseph McQueen, "For Wilde,

therefore, words offer an escape from the stifling immanence of this utilitarian, positivist and moralising secular age" (2017, 881). He believed in the transformative power of art, beauty, and empathy – the qualities he also saw in Christ. "He viewed Christ and Christianity as capable of transforming human beings into sentient people who demonstrate sympathy as well as self-reliance; and for Wilde, both attributes render people conscious of art and culture and aware of the importance of their souls" (Quintus 1991, 515). As famously expressed in Wilde's "The Soul of Man Under Socialism": "He who would lead a Christlike life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself" (1891, 300).

In "The Canterville Ghost", Wilde transforms the traditional Christian notion of salvation through the character of Virginia. In Christian theology, salvation is typically rooted in the idea of repentance, which is a process involving the recognition of one's sin, the feeling of remorse, turning away from sin, and seeking forgiveness from God. Traditionally, this spiritual journey requires an intercessory figure, usually a saint, to plead on behalf of the sinner. However, Wilde subverts this model and creates a form of redemption that depends on human compassion and is free from the theological constraints of repentance and divine judgment. Sir Simon does not undergo a dramatic moral transformation, does not confess his sins before God, nor is he subjected to divine judgment. In fact, he does not even show any genuine remorse for his actions, which, according to the Christian doctrine, is a crucial step in receiving forgiveness. When he speaks to Virginia about his past wrongdoings, he states, "I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery" (Wilde 2019, 26). His sorrow is not born of regret but stems from the weariness of his long existence. Despite this, redemption comes to him through the character of Virginia Otis, who hears him and forgives him not out of divine command but out of human compassion. She embodies an interceding, yet secular saint, who mediates between the realms of the living and the dead, not because of religious duty but of pure empathy. She does not preach but listens, understands the Ghost's suffering, and offers forgiveness through an emotional bond. The journey to the Garden of Death, which she makes to plead with the Angel of Death on Sir Simon's behalf, is one of mutual transformation, as Virginia learns the gravity of sorrow and grief while Sir Simon finds peace. This vision of salvation is profoundly anti-dogmatic, challenging the traditional necessity of ritual, penance, and the concept of salvation as a transactional process

governed by divine law. Rather, as in Wilde's fairy tales, such as "The Selfish Giant", it reflects Wilde's own belief in the redemptive power of empathy and love. "The Canterville Ghost" parodies religion – if parody is understood in the ancient Greek sense, as a parallel, not to dismiss it but to reconfigure it. By presenting redemption outside the purely religious framework of repentance, Wilde offers a more compassionate understanding of salvation, one that agrees with his own understanding of Christianity.

Satirical Subversion of Superficial Morality

In the context of Wilde's broader critique of his contemporaneity, the story becomes an attempt to destabilise the superficial seriousness with which the Victorian middle-class society approached the notions of morality, punishment, and the supernatural. Sir Simon, as the ghost condemned to roam Canterville Chase for murder, should, by all religious convictions, and according to gothic conventions, be a figure of fear and pity, an embodiment of the archetypical damned soul. Wilde, however, deliberately undermines the traditional gravity associated with this archetypical figure, portraying the ghost not as terrifying or tragic but as a source of humour. Sir Simon's elaborate haunting techniques, meant to introduce terror, are met not with horror but amusement, mockery, or indifference. These comedic reversals elicit laughter, yet they also function as a satirical deconstruction of the conventional assumptions underlying traditional ghost stories. Moreover, they serve a critical function by undermining the Victorian tendency to limit the supernatural to moralising. What should be solemn is rendered absurd, and what was once morally charged becomes resolved on mundane terms. Wilde strips the ghost story of its horror, reducing it to a farce viewed from the perspective of rationality and modern practicality. Rather than evoking fear, Sir Simon evokes pity and irritation. His sombre backstory of murder and punishment, instead of serving as a cautionary tale, becomes a story of melodramatic exaggeration. But Wilde also uses this inversion to parody the solemnity of moral narratives, particularly those concerning sin, retribution, and redemption. The ghost's torment, while theatrically expressed, seems to lack genuine moral weight. Sir Simon pleads with Virginia: "You must weep with me for my sins, because I have no tears, and pray with me for my soul, because I have no faith" (Wilde 2019, 29).

His suffering is poeticised and aestheticised rather than portrayed as a genuine moral crisis – like the Victorian pieties, it is reduced to a spectacle. And, in

this way, the frivolous story becomes a serious critique of superficial morality, suggesting that morality concerned with mere appearances, like the ghost himself, has become a relic. His suffering is poeticised and aestheticised rather than portrayed as a genuine moral crisis. By stripping Sir Simon's suffering of moral depth, Wilde accuses Victorian morality, so preoccupied with religion, punishment, and piety, of superficiality and claims that morals have been reduced to a spectacle. He mocks the whole system of Victorian moral expectations, which places superficial rituals and codes of conduct over genuine inner reflection. The story suggests that morality, like the ghost himself, has become a relic. It is performative, empty, and stripped of its sacredness.

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