The Canterville Ghost and Other Stories

Oscar Wilde
Retold by John Davage

About the author
The book includes a comprehensive biography of the author in the Introduction. Oscar Wilde, or Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, was born on 16th October 1854. He was an Irish poet and dramatist, best known for one-liners such as ‘I can resist anything except temptation’ and ‘There is only one thing worse than not getting what you want, and that is, getting what you want.’ His plays are full of this kind of wit, but they also have good plots. Wilde wrote many plays including, according to many critics, the best comedy play of the nineteenth century, the farce The Importance of Being Earnest. Wilde also wrote fairy stories, short stories and one novel.

Wilde was born in Dublin, but went to Oxford University, where he proved to be brilliant academically and gained a reputation for wit and flamboyance. He went to America to lecture in 1882. When asked by the customs officer if he had anything to declare, he said ‘Nothing but my genius’.

He visited Paris in 1883 and returned to the States for the opening of his first play. He got married in 1884 and had two sons, who were, possibly, the inspiration for his first fairy tales.

Wilde was not afraid to shock society, which eventually had its revenge. He was imprisoned in 1895 for indecent behaviour, the same year that his best play was produced. While in prison, he was declared bankrupt and died shortly after his release, on 30th November 1900.

Summary

The Canterville Ghost
The Canterville Ghost in real life committed a terrible crime – he killed his wife because she was plain and a bad housekeeper. He was punished for it by his wife’s brothers, who locked him up in a room to starve to death. And yet, the story of the Canterville Ghost is largely a comedy.

The ghost has successfully haunted Canterville Chase for hundreds of years, but the Otis family from America prove too much for him, with their practical solutions to all ghostly manifestations, and the terrible twins who torment him until all he dares to do is creep around the house as quietly as possible, instead of wailing and rattling his chains. Finally the ghost confesses his problems to the girl of the family, Virginia, and she helps him to find eternal rest.

Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime
Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime is also murder – a murder yet to be committed. Lord Arthur has everything – he is rich and handsome and he is about to marry a beautiful girl. But then a chance palmreading by a chiromantist, Mr Podgers, changes his life. The man tells Lord Arthur that he sees murder in the young man’s hand … so, Lord Arthur, after a period of terror, decides to commit the murder immediately and get it out of the way so that he can get on with the rest of his life. He tries to poison his second cousin, Lady Clementina, – but she dies of natural causes without taking the poison. He then tries to blow up his uncle, the Dean of Chichester, but the bomb makes a series of small explosions which amuse the children of the house. Finally, he meets the chiromantist by chance near the river and pushes him into the water. The murder is done and he is free to marry and live happily ever after.

The Sphinx Without a Secret
The story of The Sphinx Without a Secret is told in the title. Lady Alroy is enigmatic in everything she does – a lady with the mysterious allure of a sphinx. She captures the heart of Lord Murchison with this mystery, to the point that he follows her to find out her secret. When he sees her going into a small house in a poor part of town, he jumps to the reasonable conclusion that she has a secret lover. He accuses her of this and says other terrible things to her. She denies the accusation and leaves England for Norway, where she succumbs shortly afterwards to a very bad cold. The truth is there was no secret lover,
no mystery about Lady Alroy at all. She perfected the enigmas in order to appear more interesting, and the irony is that this succeeded in both winning love and driving it away.

The original text
The Canterville Ghost was first published serially in 1887 in Court and Society Review, a magazine for the leisured upper classes. The story did not immediately receive much critical attention, and indeed Wilde was not viewed as an important author until the publication, during the 1890s, of his novel The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and of several well-received plays, including The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). In 1891, 'The Canterville Ghost' was republished in Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories.

The collected stories were severely criticised by contemporary reviewers; early critics found Wilde’s work unoriginal and derivative. More recently critics have celebrated Wilde’s ability to play with the conventions of many genres. In The Canterville Ghost, Wilde draws on fairy tales, Gothic novels, and stories of Americans abroad to shape his comic ghost story.

Background and themes
The ghost story: The Canterville Ghost is a ghost story. Ghost stories belong to the genre called horror literature, whose purpose is to scare the reader with situations that cause horror or fear. The most common technique is suspense, the slow insinuating of a doubt or of a frightening revelation, which keeps the reader interested.

Horror stories were born in the nineteenth century because there was a growing interest in the fantastic and the supernatural. The most important literary production of this period belongs to the English, American and Nordic writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Howard Philip Lovecraft, nowadays considered the fathers of this genre. Among the current writers one of the most famous is Stephen King, who wrote a lot of best-sellers.

However, this story can be defined an inverted ghost story, because a lot of elements are different from the traditional ones. The main difference is the fact that Mr Otis is not scared by the ghost, while usually people should be. Moreover, the Ghost itself is frightened by the Otis twins.

There is also comic relief bordering on farce, including trip wires, butter on the top of the stairs and buckets of water balanced on half-open doors. But the story has a dark centre. The crime and retribution which led to the haunting is ghastly, and this is really not a comedy at all, but a tale of redemption through the power of love. The innocent girl of the family, appropriately called Virginia, prays for the ghost and endures terrifying if unnamed experiences to release the ghost from his purgatory.

American vs. British society: Wilde compares the behaviour of the American Otises with that of the British upper classes. It is a study in the differences between the English, with their ghosts and their history, and the practical Americans, with their commercial remedies to all problems, even the supernatural, and the money to buy what is left of Europe.

Duty: Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime is subtitled ‘A Study of Duty’ which makes the central point of the story clear from the start. What sets this apart from other stories with this theme – that a man must do his duty whatever the personal torments involved – is that the ‘duty’ which must be performed in this case is a murder. We see the murder only from the point of view of the would-be murderer. It is a chore which Lord Arthur must commit so that he can get on with the rest of his life. In the end, he manages to commit a murder and the reader is treated to the happy event of Lord Arthur’s marriage and the happy-ever-after ending, which is typical of stories in which a man has done his duty. But surely Wilde is being ironic: he is saying the opposite.

Irony: The Sphinx Without a Secret is a deeply ironic story, too. Here, Wilde is making fun of the kind of person who always appears to be more mysterious, more ‘interesting’ than they really are. But Wilde pushes the scenario to the extreme, and presents a woman who is so obsessed with being mysterious that she drives away a man who loves her. But does Lord Murchison love the mysterious lady for herself, or for her mystery? Wilde seems to be accusing the male of the species of encouraging the behaviour and thus being complicit in the whole absurd business.

Discussion activities
Before reading
1 Research: Ask students to find information about life in Victorian England. Then, pretending to be ladies or gentlemen of the time, get them to describe a day in their lives.
The Canterville Ghost and Other Stories

Introduction

While reading

2 Guess: Divide the class into three groups. Ask each group to read the summary of one of the stories in the Introduction. Then they discuss possible answers to the questions at the end of their paragraph. Finally they share their views with the other members of the class.

3 Discuss: After sharing their views above, have students discuss which story is the most interesting and why.

After reading

4 Discuss: Have students read the biography of Oscar Wilde in the Introduction. Then get them to discuss what aspects of his life were not approved of in Victorian times but would be acceptable or usual in our present society.

The Canterville Ghost

Before reading

5 Discuss: Most cultures have legends of ghosts. But ghosts from different places behave in different ways. Have students discuss whether they believe in ghosts. Encourage them to narrate stories about ghosts in their own culture.

While reading

6 Read carefully: (pages 1–7) Ask students to read the text and find examples of American superiority. What do the Otises do which shows they believe themselves better than the people in Canterville Chase?

7 Guess: (page 8) Ask students to guess how the bloodstain reappears every morning after Washington erases it.

8 Role play: (pages 10–13) Put students into groups. Ask them to remember the ghost’s plans for each of these people on the night of Friday 17th August:

• Washington
• The Ambassador and his wife
• The twins

Then ask them to say what actually happened.

9 Discuss: (page 20) The Ghost describes the perfect place for him to sleep. Have students discuss theirs.

After reading

10 Artwork: This story takes place in Canterville Chase. What other landscapes can be associated with ghosts? Ask students to find pictures of such places and describe the habits and appearance of the ghost that might live there.

11 Role play: Asks students to role play the conversation between Virginia and her children about the events at Canterville Chase.

Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime

Before reading

12 Predict: Get students into groups to discuss the meaning of the title of the story: Who will commit the crime? Who will be the victim?

13 Research: Ask students to work in groups and to look up information about cultural and social life of the British aristocracy in Victorian times. Get students to share the information with the rest of the class.

While reading

14 Discuss: (pages 26–32) Have students find similarities and differences between what they have learnt about the cultural and social life of British aristocracy in Victorian times and the description of Lady Windermere’s party.

15 Write: (page 35) Have students write the letter Lord Arthur Saville sent to Sybil with the basket of spring flowers.

16 Group work: (pages 40–45) Ask students to work in groups and explain why each of these sentences is funny.

a  So you’re taking a serious interest in politics?

b  I didn’t know you felt so strongly about religion.

c  I live only for my art.

After reading

17 Read carefully: Ask students to read the text and find examples which explain why this story is a ‘Study of Duty’.

18 Discuss: Get the students to work in groups and discuss the following: Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime has a happy ending. Are you surprised or annoyed at this? Give your opinion. Ask students to imagine the ending if Mr Podgers had not died.

The Sphinx Without a Secret

Before reading

19 Research: Get students to work in groups and look up information about the Sphinx.

20 Guess: Ask students to guess what the story is about. Get them to speculate: if a Sphinx is a mysterious person, is there sphinx without a secret?

While reading

21 Pair work: (pages 54–56) Get students to work in pairs and to make a list of the strange things that Lady Alroy did.

22 Role play: (page 56) Have students imagine the conversation between Lord Murchison and Lady Alroy when he was angry because she said that she had not met anyone in Cumnor Street.

After reading

23 Discuss: Have students get into groups and discuss whether Lord Murchison fell in love with Lady Alroy or with the mystery that surrounded her. And why did she appear so mysterious?