

The Canterville Ghost

Oscar Wilde

Introduction

This ungraded summary is for the teacher's use only and should not be given to students.

The story

Hiram B. Otis, a rich American, buys the old English House of Canterville Chase from Lord Canterville. Lord Canterville warns him that there is a ghost in the house, but Otis is not worried – he doesn't believe in ghosts.

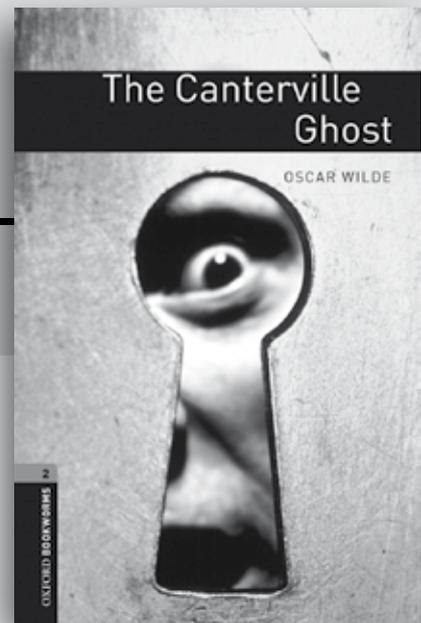
One July evening, Otis, his wife, and his children move into the house. There are four children; Washington, the eldest, Virginia, a sweet fifteen-year-old, and the twins – two happy, noisy boys. They are met by Mrs Umney, the housekeeper.

Almost immediately they see a bloodstain on the carpet. Mrs Umney explains that it is the blood of Lady Eleanore de Canterville, who was murdered there by her husband, Sir Simon, in 1575. People have tried to clean the bloodstain away, but it will not go. Washington, however, cleans the stain away with Pinkerton's Famous Stain Cleaner.

The next day the stain has returned, and although the Otis family clean it away every morning, it returns every night. Then, one night, Mr Otis meets the ghost of Sir Simon. He is woken by the noise of its chains, so he offers the ghost some oil to make the chains quieter. The ghost is very unhappy – he feels that his job is to go around frightening people, and clearly the Otis family are not frightened at all.

One night, the ghost puts on a suit of armour (he thinks this will be frightening), but it is too heavy for him and he falls over. Another night, the twins make their own ghost, out of a brush and a bed sheet, and leave it in the corridor. Sir Simon sees it, is terrified, and runs away. The boys, and Washington, continue to play tricks on the ghost, and for some time he does not appear.

After a few days, the ghost meets Virginia. She doesn't pay tricks on him – she talks to him. Sir Simon explains that he died because his wife's brothers punished him for her murder by locking him up without food and water until he died. Since then he has been a ghost, unable to sleep. He will only be able to rest if a girl prays, and cries, for him. Virginia agrees to help him.



That night Virginia does not join her family for tea. The family are worried, but at midnight she appears from a secret door at the top of the stairs, looking pale, and carrying a small box. She takes her family into a secret room and shows them the skeleton of Sir Simon. Virginia explains that he is now at peace, because she prayed for him, and that he then gave her the box of jewels. The family bury Sir Simon, and his ghost never returns to Canterville Chase.

Virginia wears the beautiful jewels that the ghost gave her on the day that she marries the young Duke of Cheshire.

Background to the story

In *The Canterville Ghost*, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), is telling a new version of the classic ghost story. In the story he shows a conflict between the old-fashioned English country house, with its Lords, and servants, and traditions – and ghosts, and the modern American practical approach of the Otis family. They don't believe in ghosts, but when they do meet one, they treat it rationally – clearing up the bloodstains and offering it oil for its chains. Even the names of the products that the family use when dealing with the ghost – Pinkerton's Famous Stain Cleaner and Tammany's Sun Oil, are clearly modern – these are factory products. Wilde is both laughing at the traditions of the English by showing them through the eyes of the Otis family, and laughing at the modern Americans who think that there is a product to solve every problem. But at the end of the story it is an old English tradition that solves the problem of Sir Simon.

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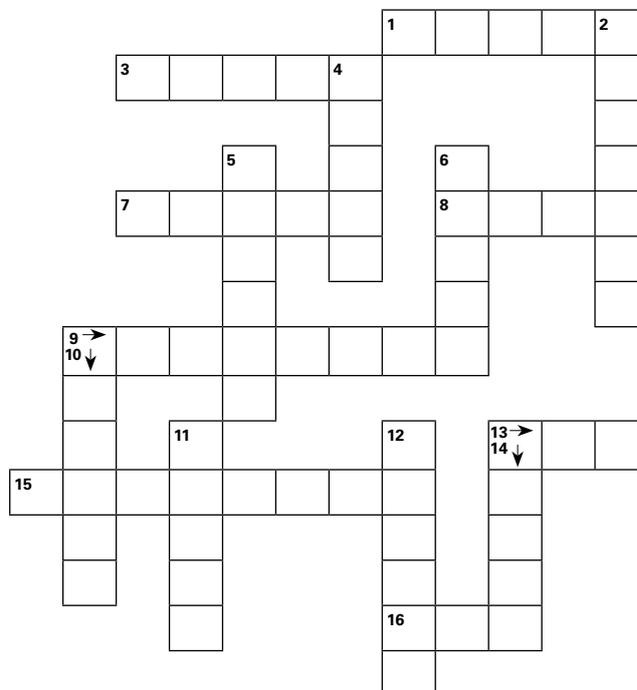
Pre-reading activity

Crossword

Look at the clues and do the crossword.

Clues

- 1 To fall down suddenly in a kind of sleep.
- 2 A very loud noise in the sky during a storm.
- 3 A dead person that living people think they can see.
- 4 Two children born from the same mother at the same time.
- 5 A stick of wax that gives light when it burns.
- 6 When something is not dirty it is . . .
- 7 A lot of metal rings joined together in a line.
- 8 A title of a man from an important family.
- 9 The bones of a whole person.
- 10 Cloth that is put around a dead body.
- 11 A plant with thin green leaves.
- 12 Very great fear.
- 13 A container for water, milk, etc.
- 14 A beautiful and expensive stone.
- 15 Very bad.
- 16 A liquid used to make machines work quietly and smoothly.



The answers are these words:

skeleton, jug, thunder, candle, terror, twins, shroud, grass, ghost, jewel, faint, oil, clean, lord, horrible, chain.

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the vocabulary and context of the story

Time: 15–20 minutes

Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or each group of students. Ask the students to complete the crossword. To make the activity easier give them the words listed in The answers are these words, or to make it more

difficult, omit these words. When the students have finished, ask them to think about what sort of story might include this vocabulary.

Key: 1 faint, 2 thunder, 3 ghost, 4 twins, 5 candle, 6 clean, 7 chain, 8 lord, 9 skeleton, 10 shroud, 11 grass, 12 terror, 13 jug, 14 jewel, 15 horrible, 16 oil

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While reading activity

What next?

*Who is going to do which of these things in the next chapters?
Join the names to the things which happen.*



1 Mr Otis



2 Mrs Otis



3 One of the twins



4 The ghost



5 Virginia



6 Lord Canterville



7 Washington

- a makes friends with the ghost
- b kills somebody
- c comes back to Canterville Chase
- d goes to America
- e frightens the ghost
- f meets another ghost
- g makes some new clothes for the ghost
- h dies
- i makes a lot of money from the ghost
- j leaves Canterville Chase
- k gets married
- l attacks the ghost
- m
- n

To the teacher

Where: At the end of Chapter 2

Aim: To give the students the opportunity to predict where the story is going

Time: 15–20 minutes

Organization: Give each student, or group of

students a copy of the worksheet. Tell them that they must link the names with one or more of the sentences next to them. Any name can be joined to any sentence. The students can also write in their own ideas for sentences m and n.

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After reading activity

Who, what, why?

Fill in the spaces.

| WHO | WHAT | WHY |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Lord Canterville | sold Canterville Chase | because his family couldn't live there. |
| | bought Canterville Chase | |
| | | because there are no ghosts in any country. |
| | cleaned the floor with Pinkerton's Famous Stain Cleaner | |
| Lord Augustus | | because the chains were noisy. |
| | gave the ghost some of Dr Dobell's stomach medicine | |
| | put a jug of water on top of a door | |
| The ghost's wife's brothers | | |
| | took Virginia's paints | |
| Virginia | | |
| | put Sir Simon into the ground | |
| Lord Canterville | | |
| | | because he loved her. |

To the teacher

Aim: To consolidate comprehension of the story

Time: 15–20 minutes

Organization: Give each student, or group of

students, a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to add as much information as possible in the blank spaces.