

“The Canterville Ghost:” Sir Simon as Wilde’s Mouthpiece for Criticism and Compromise

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Abstract

The paper explores Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterville Ghost” with view at showing how the author employs the figure of Sir Simon to convey messages of both criticism and compromise concerning the Anglo-American conflict at that time. Through Simon, Wilde rejects the stereotypical view of the Americans and passionately looks for compromise.

Key words: The Canterville Ghost; Criticism; Compromise

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“The Canterville Ghost” came at the apogee of the conflict in the Anglo-American relations. During that time, America and Britain were resisting reciprocal positive influence. America, with its modern spirit, was at odds with the British values which it regarded as mere symptoms of backwardness. The British, on the other hand, highly esteemed their values and regarded the heresies of the New World as threats to the tradition that constituted their cultural identity. Hence, many British accounts, travelogues and other literary genres were composed with view at exposing all aspects of the modernized America as it appears in the story.

Wilde’s story stands as an antithesis to these subversive texts. As opposed to other writers developing accounts of the American life, Wilde does not ridicule the manners of the Americans for the mere purpose of exposing

them. Rather, with his acumen of humor, Wilde employs his Ghost to comment on some characteristics of the American society with view at promulgating a wholesale rejection of the crippling cultural struggle between the Americans and the British. In the story, Wilde expresses a heart-felt desire for obliterating the clash and finding a middle ground that would combine the aesthetics of the Old World and the developments of the New one.

Written after his tour in America, “The Canterville Ghost” reflects Wilde’s negative impression of some aspects of the American life. As Richard Elmann observes, Wilde was aware of the malevolence directed against him by the Americans during his tour. His attitude towards this negative reception appears as he declares: “I am not the one who is injured, it is the public” (p.184). This shows that, in the story, Wilde’s concern goes far from retaliating to this acute criticism directed against him. Rather, he is overwhelmed by the broader issue of the clash between American and British nations. Thus it might well be argued that the story accentuates Wilde’s hope for eliminating this conflict between the two sides.

Wilde’s concern in the story is twofold. First, by juxtaposing the modern American spirit with the traditional British history in one setting, he intends to expose the shortcomings of the American temperament in terms of its pragmatism, materialistic orientations and sense of superiority in addition to many other American idiosyncrasies. Second, in portraying the confrontation between the two cultures, Wilde aims at achieving reconciliation between the American new spirit and the British tradition. In other words, Wilde’s critique of the American family and his elaboration on the clash are essentially presented for the sake of establishing cordial relations between the American and British cultures and ending the culture war between the two sides.

Wilde’s condemnation of the Americans principles and values as well as his hope for a compromise between the Americans and the British is both projected through

the Ghost. Sir Simon is the prominent figure in the story functioning as Wilde's mouthpiece for criticism of the Americans as well as a mediator for compromise between the Americans and the British. Through his encounters with the American family, Sir Simon conveys to the reader a gloomy picture of the American mentality and values. At the same time, in the final experience of Sir Simon with Virginia, Wilde insinuates the idea that there is a hope of establishing harmony between the two Worlds.

As a symbol of the English classical spirit, Sir Simon is portrayed in a way that makes him gain the favor of the reader. To start with, it is really significant that the story itself is entitled "The Canterville Ghost." In addition, the story is told not from the perspective of the people haunted by the Ghost, but from the perspective of the Ghost himself. This validates the argument that Sir Simon could logically be labeled the protagonist in this story since he is the one who really suffers from the struggles he is involved in.

In fact, one can extend the analysis and argue that Wilde's Ghost can be seen as a tragic hero. As the tragic hero of the text, Sir Simon gains the sympathy of the reader despite his heinous actions. Moreover, Wilde is careful to show us the feelings of Sir Simon that reflect his humanity. Wilde's Ghost suffers from distress and depression on many occasions. As Patrick Horan argues, "Wilde's Ghost is kinder and more humane than the American family" (p.80).

To strengthen the sympathy of the reader towards Sir Simon, Wilde makes him experience so much failure and depression. Wilde actually succeeds in portraying Sir Simon as a victim. Sir Simon was starved to death by his brothers-in-law. He suffered a lot among the American materialist guests and fought strongly to achieve his aim. Actually, the detestable modernizing trends of these guests terrorized him. All his efforts to scare them proved useless at the end.

Wilde's Ghost is also more responsible than the stereotyped American family. In fact, his frightening actions constitute a proof of his great sense of responsibility. Sir Simon, haunts the house not because he has evil intentions by nature, but because he feels that these actions are his "only reason for existing." He feels it is his duty to haunt the house. The narrator mentions that "It was his solemn duty to appear in the corridor once a week, and to gibber from the large oriel window on the first and third Wednesday in every month, and he did not see how he could honorably escape from his obligations" (p.10). Sir Simon's sense of responsibility adds to the compassion the reader feels towards him as opposed to the negative feeling towards the American family.

Through this positive depiction of Sir Simon, Wilde sets him in perfect opposition to the modern American nature represented in the Otises. In other

words, the portrayal of Sir Simon points at the positive characterization of British-ness in contrast to the negative aspects of American-ness. This contrast between Sir Simon and the American family emphasizes the tension between "English-ness" and "American-ness." Hence, Sir Simon's confrontations with the members of the American family emerge as a satire of American values and ways of life.

In addition to this illuminating portrayal of Sir Simon, Wilde makes him play a key role in providing an exquisite account about the American way of living. Wilde conveys his attack against the American family by portraying his Ghost as an omniscient observer of the corrupt American mentality. Sir Simon is Wilde's tool for providing indiscreet remarks that cover American lack of appreciation of the aesthetics of life, their unjustified hatred and envy of the British, their excessive pragmatism, their abhorring materialism in addition to their blind adherence to prevalent American beliefs.

The Otises' disbelief of the existence of Sir Simon and their failure to understand his attributes is set as a living testimony on their failure to grasp the aesthetics of the world around them. Although Sir Simon managed to scare every inhabitant of the Canterville Chase, he could not create this feeling in the Otis family. He adopted the role of ghostly apparitions such as Suicide's Skeleton, The Strangled Baby, Jonas the Graveless, , The Blood-Sucker of Bexley Moor , the Corpse-Snatcher of Chertsey Barn, and The Headless Earl. These apparitions managed to horrify previous residents for hundred of years; however, none of them worked with the American family. Actually, The American family haunts Sir Simon far more than Sir Simon haunts them; and hence they succeed in terrorizing him rather than be terrorized by him. As Kimberly Lutz argues, the reader cannot treat a Ghost story seriously "when the Ghost is not taken seriously by the characters he attempts to haunt" (p.60).

Addingly, Sir Simon's artistry is totally overlooked by the Otises. This makes them fit into Wilde's description of those who cannot appreciate the value of aestheticism as the "blind happy souls who cannot find the way to beauty" (Ellmann, p.159). Sir Simon himself criticizes the American family's inability to absorb the aesthetic innuendoes of his abominable actions. When he notices that the family is not moved by his actions he describes them as people who were "quite incapable of appreciating the symbolic value of sensuous phenomena" (p.10).

Likewise, the Otises' confrontations with Sir Simon prove the point that Americans hold a negative opinion of the British without any reason. Their hatred of the English tradition goes so far that they even refuse to accept the English weather. In addition, Americans were perceived to be envious of the English aristocracy. Mr. and Mrs. Otis was actually aspiring to assume the role of English

aristocrats despite their constant espousal of American superiority. Wilde clearly insinuates this aspiration at the end after Virginia met Sir Simon. Virginia married the Duke, which as the narrator explains, "is the reward for all good little American girls" (p.21).

During his American tour, Wilde criticized the excessive reliance of the Americans on practical solutions. He stated that their excessive reliance on practical solutions "makes men themselves machines also" (Ellmann, p.194). The American family's reception of Sir Simon is emblematic of this overbearing practicality and pragmatism. They believed in the solutions promised by Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover, the Paragon Detergent and Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. They received Sir Simon's bloodstains with the Detergent, and when Sir Simon produced "his celebrated peal of demoniac laughter" (p.7), Mrs. Otis treated it with Doctor Dobell's tincture. Mr. Otis also suggested using Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to stop the clanking of Sir Simon's chains.

In other words, in their dealing with the existence of Sir Simon, the Otises embraced rationalism and relied on practical solutions to the most. They embraced their character roles and played out the American pragmatism very well. In brief, they viewed Sir Simon's actions as a problem to be solved and hence they looked for a quick fix and a practical solution to that problem.

Henry Labouchere in that Wilde's hyper aestheticism is presented "as an antidote to America's hyper materialism" (Ellmann, p.156). In the story, Wilde provides a commentary on the American materialistic vulgarity through their encounters with the aesthetic actions of Sir Simon. From the outset, Mr. Otis rejected the presence of the Ghost and claimed that if there were any ghosts in Europe; Americans would have bought them all. For the American family, the whole world was a commodity, and they could buy it and solve all its problems with the power of the dollar. The materialism of the American family is undermined by Sir Simon himself. He stated that the American family "were evidently people on a low, material plan of existence"; he also expressed his annoyance of "the gross materialism of Mrs. Otis" (p.7).

Wilde's benign criticism of the values of the American family is replete with the humor and wit known of him. The reader notices that in the story there is a predominance of the hilarious and humane sort of commentary over the harsh and hostile. The story is characterized by its apparent lightness in castigating the American way of life. Again, it is Sir Simon who contributes to developing this Wildean wit and humor. Through Sir Simon, Wilde embellishes the negative account of the American family with humor and irony. In other words, Sir Simon provides Wilde with a large canvas and plenty of opportunity for humor.

Wilde makes his Ghost involved in humorous encounters with American characters with view at ridiculing stereotypical American behavior. Each of these

American characters is also given a witty and comic characterization that helps exposing the unrefined taste of the Americans. As Lutz notes, "the story begins and ends by parodying stock characters, and comic moment succeeds comic moment throughout the narrative" (p.18).

The most important character who is poked fun at in her encounters with Sir Simon's horrifying actions is Mrs. Otis, who is described by Wilde as being "a celebrated New York belle." Mrs. Otis's lack of understanding of Sir Simon is a clear indication of her typical American practicality as well as her blatant disregard for British history and tradition represented in the Ghost. Her most humorous reaction highlight Wilde's attack on how "the wildest liberty of nature is retrained by governing laws" (Ellmann, p.195). She brought the Ghost a bottle of Doctor Dobell's tincture, and addressed him saying "If it is indigestion, you will find it a most excellent remedy" (p.7). She also resorts to using the commercial stain remover to obliterate the bloodstain.

Through Mrs. Otis's attempts to deal with Sir Simon, Wilde subverts many common ideas prevalent at that time. One of these is the ideas represented by The Society for Physical Research. As Deborah Blum argues, The Society for Psychical Research was established in 1882 to prove the existence of ghosts (p.28). Oscar Wilde refers to this Society and mocks Mrs. Otis when she announced her intention of joining that Society to understand Sir Simon. In addition, Wilde makes fun of the Americans' belief in mesmerism, which, as Derek Forrest observes, suggests the possibility of mind control through hypnosis (p.36).

Mr. Otis is also laughable in his treatment of Sir Simon's actions. Many examples show Wilde poking fun at the boisterous American head of the family. Mr. Otis called upon Sir Simon "in accordance with California etiquette" (p.7). He also gave Sir Simon a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator to stop the disturbing noise of the chains; simply the noise made him unable to sleep. In addition, Mr. Otis's his rejection of the presence of Sir Simon makes him unable to guess that Sir Simon had kidnapped Virginia. In brief, the way Mr. Otis deals with the existence of Sir Simon is more abominable than the attributes of Sir Simon himself. The reader becomes preoccupied more with this strange reaction to Sir Simon's deeds than with the actions of Sir Simon himself.

This humorous way of criticizing the American mentality substantiates the argument that Wilde's intention goes far from the poignant subversion of the principles of the New World. Despite his abundant criticism of the American beliefs and way of life in the story, Wilde does not merely aim at exposing the American shortcomings. Through his Ghost, Wilde also expresses his desire for reconciliation between America and Britain. As mentioned above, in pitting the New World against the Old, Wilde has a message that he intends to convey, and he uses Sir Simon to convey it.

Through Sir Simon, Wilde creates a character that apprehends both the beauty of the past and the reality of the present. Despite his clinging to the values of British tradition, Sir Simon assimilated the values of the modern American life. In addition, by virtue of his humane spirit, Sir Simon represents a hopeful future; a future that combines the values of the two conflicting Worlds. He accentuates Wilde’s belief that “art is the one thing which Death cannot harm” (Ellmann, p.181). His self-willed death at the end brings peace to the Chase.

Wilde declared that his literary works represent his mission, which is “to make [aestheticism] the basis for a new civilization” (Ellmann, p.191). Wilde employs Sir Simon to convey his mission of creating this new civilization that is based on love and mutual respect. Sir Simon articulates Wilde’s hope for the solidarity between the Americans and the British. In this sense, he is established as Wilde’s mouthpiece for compromise. This role basically comes through Sir Simon’s encounters with Virginia. By being different from other members of the American family, Virginia helps Sir Simon accentuate Wilde’s message.

In “Impressions of America,” Wilde says: “Every American girl is entitled to have twelve young men devoted to her. They remain her slaves and she rules them with charming nonchalance” (p.11). However, Virginia is far different from this image. As opposed to other members of the family, Virginia was the only one who “did not enter into the joke,” (p.7) and was distressed at the sight of the bloodstain. She could easily accept and assimilate the views of other. Moreover, it is significant that Virginia was the only member of the American family who could paint. That is to say she was the only one who could appreciate the art and the aesthetics of the Old World. She fits into the description of the “golden girl” represented in the sentences on the window:

When a golden girl can win Prayer from out the lips of sin,
When the barren almond bears, and a little child gives away
its tears, Then shall all the house be still And peace come to
Canterville. (p.16)

In other words, Virginia’s personality encompasses the traits that make her reach a better understanding of Sir Simon. This understanding is the reason that encouraged Sir Simon to talk to her. Sir Simon went into a dialogue with her that gave her the opportunity to know him more and hence to appreciate the other point of view. His dialogue with her led to her enlightenment. It helped her understand “what Life is, what Death signifies, and why Love is stronger than both” (p.22).

By talking to Sir Simon, Virginia proves that it is possible to be part of the British aristocracy and at the same time embrace the new spirit of America. This is symbolized by Virginia’s reward from the casket of valuable jewels and her marriage to the Duke of Cheshire. In other words, her joining the British aristocracy is an indication of the

actualization of the conflation of the New World and the Old one and the combination of the two spirits.

The dialogue that Sir Simon had with Virginia also authenticates Wilde’s concern for the combination of the past aesthetic value and the past art on the one hand and the modernized orientations in life on the other. In this sense, the dialogue symbolizes the appreciation and assimilation of the historical tradition of the Old World and the advancements perpetuated by the New one. Through this dialogue, Wilde also stresses the significance of the role of the youth. For him, the young are capable of assimilating the beauty of the past and the updates of the future in one world.

The impact of the dialogue between Sir Simon and Virginia can be clearly seen in the events of the story. A close reading of the text shows that the only full healthy conversation that takes place in “The Canterville Ghost” is the one between Sir Simon and Virginia. It is true that at the beginning there is a short conversation between Lord Canterville and Mr. Otis over the rent of the Chase; however, the conversation between Sir Simon and Virginia is paramount. Their conversation signifies the reconciliation of opposites.

Moreover, it is really noticeable that the conversation that takes place between Lord Canterville and Mr. Otis at the end is different from that which takes place between them as beginning. The subject matter of the conversation at the beginning is the rent. The tone between the two characters is inimical and everyone is trying to beat the other by his logic. However, the conversation between the two at the end is more peaceful. Mr. Otis is basically different. He is no longer that materialist and haughty man. He appears as an honest person who wants to return the jewelry to the owner. The dialogue between Sir Simon and Virginia has changed the status quo.

This validates the point that dialogue and interaction are the reason of the termination the conflict; they are the reason for the end of the discordance between the Americans and the British. It is this interaction between the Old World and the New one that Wilde is aspiring for. Since the dialogue made Sir Simon brought peace to the Canterville Chase, the positive communication between the two Worlds will definitely bring peace between the two different cultures. In addition, as Sir Simon’s talk with Virginia leads to her enlightenment, the effective interaction between the Americans and the British will lead to a similar enlightenment. It is an enlightenment that will open up great horizons for love and obliterate the prevalent antipathy.

So as Daniel Miller observes, the story begins in an “unbridgeable gulf” between Sir Simon, who stands as a representative of the tradition and history of the Old World and the American family who represent the values of the New world (p.108). By the end of the tale, this gulf is bridged. In other words, the cultural dispute that the

story features from the very beginning is settled at the end. Ultimately, Sir Simon reconciled American and British values and managed to convey the Wildean message.

Wild's message is that of the necessity of reconciliation between the Americans and the British as well as putting an end to this lifelong struggle and enmity between the two parties. His ironic statement that Mrs. Otis sets an excellent example that "we have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language" (p.2) is rather a plea. Wilde aims at reaching a situation in which the bonds between the American and British spirits can obliterate all differences, even the differences resulting from some idiosyncrasies in language.

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