

HUMOUR AND FEAR: A STUDY OF THE HUMORISTIC RESOURCES IN WILDE'S *THE CANTERVILLE GHOST*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines in detail the alternance of humour and horror in the story *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde, and the manner in which the author was always able to obtain the desired result, changing his approach to the theme. It studies the story contribution to the parody of the horror genre, mentioning the clichés which are commonly used in this type of fiction and of which Wilde makes continuous mockery. It also reviews his satire of the American society, which is in constant conflict with the values of the traditional English society. Finally, the article includes a detailed account of the humorous resources used by the writer to entertain his readers.

Key WORDS: Wilde – ghost – parody – society – terror

RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza en detalle la alternancia de humor y horror en el relato de Oscar Wilde *The Canterville Ghost*, así como la manera en la que el autor conseguía siempre el efecto deseado, cambiando su forma de tratar el tema. Estudia su contribución a la parodia del género terrorífico, con mención de los elementos tópicos que se suelen emplear en este tipo de narraciones y de los que Wilde hace una burla recurrente. También revisa su sátira de la sociedad norteamericana, en conflicto constante con los valores de la tradicional sociedad inglesa. Por último, el artículo incluye una relación detallada de los recursos cómicos empleados por el escritor para conseguir entretener a sus lectores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Wilde – fantasma – parodia – sociedad – terror

1. HORROR STORIES AND THEIR PARODY

Horror and humour blend in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* and invite us to analyse in detail this genre mixture, which can be seen as an example of the Irish writer's craftsmanship with literary elements. The humoristic style of the author —always defined as subtle and contained— shows all its strength and a very concrete satirical aim here.

The Canterville Ghost was first published serially in 1887 in *Court and Society Review*, a magazine for the leisured upper classes. Throughout the story, Wilde plays with and parodies some of the conventional plotlines and characters of the supernatural genre: «Wilde provides through an extended parody and outline of what may be regarded as the quintessential haunted-house story, and perhaps also much of its explanations» (Miller 107).

Given the immense popularity of ghost stories and the Gothic novel in the 19th century, Wilde had a receptive audience for this comic short story. Moreover, he inspired himself from various books and used many comic sources to shape his story. Thomas De Quincey's *Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, a satirical essay, is one apparent source. Wilde also seems to have been aware of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, a parody of the Gothic novel so popular in the early nineteenth century. Maybe, for this very reason, the story was severely criticized by contemporary reviewers; early critics found Wilde's work unoriginal and derivative. Though Wilde offers a comic treatment, he finds inspiration for Sir Simon's character in Alfred Tennyson's serious poem «Maud», as well as in the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's «Christabel». There is also a possible influence of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) on *The Canterville Ghost*. Leaving aside the controversial aspect of its originality, we see a well-done parody of various subjects: actors, dandies, American materialism, aristocratic excess, ghost stories, and Gothic conventions.

2. REASONS BEHIND THE STORY

There are discrepancies regarding Wilde's purpose while writing the text. We find several possible aims. Supremacy of love above the rest of human considerations could be one of the most evident. Though Wilde tells a humorous tale, it appears that he also has a message, and he uses fifteen-year-old Virginia to convey it. Virginia says that the ghost helped her see the significance of life and death, and why love is stronger than both. This is certainly not the first time an author has used the traditional ghost story and the theme of life and death to examine the issue of forgiveness.

On the other hand, the plot of the story can be considered a pretext for a personal catharsis. Philip K. Cohen, in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, tells us about: «the camouflage of hilarity» (48). Cohen argues that this seemingly light ghost story «faithfully renders Wilde's life during the mid 1880s,» a time when Wilde, by necessity was leading a double life.¹

¹ By 1886, Wilde was involved in a homosexual relationship with Robert Ross and had also been married for two years. Both his marriage and the social morals of late Victorian England demanded that Wilde hid his affair.

Moreover, even before the scandal of Wilde's trial for homosexuality and subsequent imprisonment (1895-1897), critics had a difficult time separating Wilde's life from his works. Wilde's credo of «life for art's sake» encouraged the comparison. For this very reason it has been said that *The Canterville Ghost* is primarily about the nature of performance, an essay on mask-wearing. The Ghost, Sir Simon, studies the art of haunting. He constantly prepares for his role as a ghost. He uses theatrical vocabulary to describe his past roles. «Debut» and «furore» indicate both his performance and the audience for whom he plays. Even when not performing, the Ghost exhibits the stereotypical affectations of actors and dandies. The Ghost symbolises Art, which must constantly surpass itself in several forms. And Wilde also tries to convey through the story the dangers of the urban materialism so frequent in the bourgeoisie.

3. ALTERNANCE OF HORROR AND HUMOUR

In this story, the peculiar mixture of genres —or of generic elements— carried out by Wilde is most significant. Usually, the humouristic elements which can be found in horror literature are based on the fear shown by characters without a high intellectual level; and these characters are never the protagonists, but mere witnesses of the tragedy. In this story, through the procedure of inversion the established order is changed, thus achieving the sympathy of the reader to fall on the dark side of reality.

Wilde introduces suspense to make this story involving and exciting. These suspense parts also serve to make this funny tale a horror book. In fact, the moments of suspense are only a few with respect to the comic elements and the humoristic devices used by the author in the book, but they are profoundly effective and respond to what can be expected from the most traditional Gothic novel. Terrifying happenings are recounted:

My grandaunt, the Dowager Duchess of Bolton, was frightened into a fit, from which she never really recovered, by two skeleton hands being placed on her shoulders as she was dressing for dinner (*Canterville Ghost* 193).

After this unfortunate accident, none of the younger servants would stay at home and we are told that Lady Canterville often got very little sleep at night, because of the mysterious noises that came from the corridor and the library. The intensity of the mysterious element is strengthened, as in the following description of the Ghost:

His eyes were as red burning coals; long grey hair fell over his shoulders in matted coils; his garments, which were of antique cut, were soiled and ragged, and from his wrists and ankles hung heavy manacles and rusty gyves (*CG* 196).

Moreover, we are told about a butler who had shot himself in the pantry because he had seen a green hand tapping at the window-pane, and about the beautiful Lady Stutfield, who was always obliged to wear a black velvet band round her throat to hide the mark of five fingers burnt upon her white skin, and who drowned herself at last in the carp-pond at the end of King's Walk.

4. HUMOROUS DEVICES

Let us deal now with the specific analysis of the humorous devices that Wilde includes in his Gothic story with the purpose of completely changing its meaning. Basically, we can divide them in three sections: horror genre parody, social satire and the specific literary resources.

4.1. Genre parody

Parody means the belittlement of a literary genre through deformation and ridicule. In this case, it is a caricature of literature. To ensure its humour, knowledge of the subject is essential, as well as a good choice of the elements in which the parody is based. It implies contrast and exaggeration of attitudes. That is precisely what Wilde does while creating his essentially trite characters. The story begins and ends by parodying stock characters. Each member of the Otis family is summed up in a witty characterization that marks him or her as the subject of comedy rather than tragedy. The Otis family embrace its character roles, and plays out the American stereotypes to their fullest.

Obviously, the character of the ghost of Sir Simon of Canterville, who died in 1584, is the most profusely elaborated and the one which contains more burlesque and parodical elements. Nevertheless, it is but a stereotype. The main character of a ghost story is the ghost, of course, and Sir Simon has no identity other than that of an evil ghost. And a British ghost should show pride of lineage, a great dignity and a profound respect for tradition. For this last reason, Sir Simon expresses himself in perfect old English and swears: «...according to the picturesque phraseology of the antique school, that, when Chanticleer had sounded twice his merry horn, deeds of blood would be wrought, and murder walk abroad with silent feet» (CG 202).

His extreme dignity is constantly offended by the Otises, who refuse to be frightened by his appearances, what provokes an intense feeling of frustration in the Ghost, repeatedly shown in the text: «Then, dashing the bottle violently upon the polished floor, he fled down the corridor, uttering hollow groans, and emitting a ghastly green light» (CG 197). «He went on, muttering strange sixteenth-century curses, and ever and anon brandishing the rusty dagger in the midnight air» (CG 200). «For five days he kept his room» (CG 202). He cannot bear to be ignored, so he reaffirms his despise for the living:

(He) made up his mind to give up the point of the blood-stain on the library floor. If the Otis family did not want it, they clearly did not deserve it. They were evidently people on a low, material plane of existence, and quite incapable of appreciating the symbolic value of sensuous phenomena (CG 202).

Along with these feelings of dignity, Sir Simon shows an enormous vanity, something not very appropriate for a dead man. He hopes that even modern Americans would be thrilled at the sight of a Spectre in armour. His desire is to leave an imprint, to be admired, to be remembered. So, with the enthusiastic egotism of a true artist, he recalls his most horrifying appearances, as if they were theatrical performances:

(He) smiled bitterly to himself as he recalled to mind his last appearance as «Red Reuben, or the Strangled Babe», his début as «Guant Gibeon, the Blood-sucker of Bexley Moor», and the furore he had excited one lovely June evening by merely playing ninepins with his own bones upon the lawn-tennis ground (CG 197-198).

The Ghost becomes a literary replica of Wilde, a dandy who pretends to compensate his social deficiencies with good taste and an elegant appearance. Hence the stress on the clothes, which gives the Ghost an element of puerility which augments the contrast and reinforces the parody. Throughout the story, Sir Simon pays as much attention to his gruesome attire as any dandy would. Indeed, it can take the Ghost up to three hours to don an appropriate costume. For his appearance on Friday, August 17th, he spends most of that day looking over his wardrobe: «Ultimately deciding in favour of a large slouched hat with a red feather, a winding-sheet frilled at the wrists and neck, and a rusty dagger» (CG 199).

Wilde skilfully mocks the most common resources of the horror genre. Sir Simon is but a victim of clichés and is forced to behave as it is expected from a well-bred ghost. We are told 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 Wednesdays every month: «He did not see how he could honourably escape from his obligations» (CG 202).

Thus, the elements which conform the terrific setting are debunked. The ghost utters the famous demoniac laughter that had turned Lord Raker's wig grey in a single night. His metamorphosis into a large black dog was an accomplishment for which he was justly renowned, and to which the family doctor always attributed the permanent idiocy of Lord Canterville's uncle, the Hon. Thomas Horton. The Ghost decides to take revenge of the Otis twins through the most frequent manner: to sit upon their chests, so as to produce the stifling sensation of nightmare, to stand between them in the form of a green, icy-cold corpse, till they became paralyzed with fear, and to throw off the winding-sheet, and crawl round the room, with white, bleached bones and one rolling eyeball.

This debunking of literary clichés includes the effect that the appearances of the Ghost used to produce:

He thought of the Dowager Duchess, whom he had frightened into a fit as she stood before the glass in her lace and diamonds; of the four housemaids, who had gone into hysterics when he merely grinned at them through the curtains on one of the spare bedrooms; of the rector of the parish, whose candle he had blown out as he was coming late one night from the library, and who had been under the care of Sir William Gull ever since, a perfect martyr to nervous disorders; and of old Madame de Tremouillac, who, having wakened up one morning early and seen a skeleton seated in an armchair by the fire reading her diary, had been confined to her bed for six weeks with an attack of brain fever, and, on her recovery, had become reconciled to the Church, and broken off her connection with that notorious sceptic, Monsieur de Voltaire (CG 197).

4.2. Satire of the American society

The main and more traditional humoristic resource is satire, a literary form which mixes humour, wit and a critical stand regarding human activities and institutions. It is derived from Aristotle's superiority theory, which states that laughter springs from

watching inferior or imperfect persons or actions. It includes not only a mockery of the defect, but also a corrective purpose.

Wilde's own experience on the lecture circuit in the United States helped him ridicule stereotypical American behaviour. From the beginning of his story the author compares the behaviour of the American Otises with that of the British upper classes. Lord Canterville warns Mr. Otis that the presence of a ghost has made Canterville Chase uninhabitable. Mr. Otis, however, remains a sceptic. If there were any ghosts in Europe, he reasons, Americans would have bought them along with all that is old and venerable in Europe. Europe is for sale, and Americans are buying it. *The Canterville Ghost* is both a parody of the traditional ghost story and a satire of the American way of life. Wilde obviously intends to satirize American materialism, but he pokes fun at traditional English culture as well. For example, Wilde mocks the exaggerated British respect for institutions and authority. To convince Mr. Otis of the existence of the ghost, the following statement is used:

I feel bound to tell you, Mr. Otis, that the ghost has been seen by several living members of my family, as well as by the rector of the parish, the Rev. Augustus Dampier, who is a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge (CG 193).

Moreover, Wilde pokes fun at the Rich American's aesthetic view of England as a museum of interesting ruins and curiosities (Sloan 136).

Nevertheless, the author mainly attacks the USA, although the criticism is made with humour. Mr. Otis insists on the predominance of America: American people are the bosses anywhere in the world. This narrow patriotism is seen in the nicknames of the twins, «usually called The Star and Stripes» (CG 194), and in the very name of the eldest son, «christened Washington by his parents in a moment of patriotism, which he never ceased to regret» (CG 194).

For Wilde as narrator of the story, the USA is a world without any culture. According to him, the ordinary conversations of cultured Americans of the better class centre around the difficulty of obtaining green corn, buckwheat cakes, and hominy, even in the best English houses, the advantages of the baggage-check system in railway travelling and the sweetness of the New York accent as compared to the London drawl.

The principal aim of Americans is social success in an uncultured and unappreciative society. The Ghost is advised to emigrate to the USA, land of opportunities, where he will obtain great success, hiring himself to some *nouveau riche*: «I know lots of people there who would give a hundred thousand dollars to have a grandfather, and much more than that to have a family ghost» (CG 206-207).

Finally, the most frequent reproach to American character is that of materialism and an excessive practical sense and utilitarianism. Mr. Otis, while buying the castle, does not believe in anything supernatural, but, just in case, he insists on taking the furniture and the ghost at a valuation.

The blood stain, supposedly spilt by the Ghost, clearly shows the positivist and realistic attitude of the Otises:

«I am afraid something has been spilt there.»

«Yes, madam,» replied the old housekeeper in a low voice, «blood has been spilt on that spot.»

«How horrid!» cried Mrs. Otis; «I don't at all care for blood-stains in a sitting-room. It must be removed at once» (CG 195).

Notwithstanding the fact that the blood-stain has been much admired by tourists and others, and that it cannot be removed, Washington Otis uses Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent to clean it. A similar contrast between mystery and practicality can be found in other advice given by Mr. Otis to the Ghost. When the Ghost rattles his chains, Mr. Otis suggests that Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator would stop the clanking:

«My dear sir,» said Mr. Otis, «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, and there are several testimonials to that effect on the wrapper from some of our most eminent native divines. I shall leave it here for you by the bedroom candles, and will be happy to supply you with more, should you require it.» With these words the United States Minister laid the bottle down on a marble table, and, closing his door, retired to rest (CG 197).

Disgusted by the gross materialism of the Otises, Sir Simon eventually abandons his art and holes himself up in a secret room. The United States Minister feels a little annoyed to find that his present had not been accepted and decides that if the ghost really declines to use the Rising Sun Lubricator, he will have to take his chains from him. «It would be quite impossible to sleep, with such a noise going on outside the bedrooms» (CG 198).

4.3. Rhetorical resources

One of the most effective resources used by Wilde to counteract horror with humour is inversion. The story illustrates Wilde's tendency to reverse situations into their opposites as the Otises gain the upper hand and succeed in terrorizing the ghost rather than be terrorized by him. Wilde pairs this reversal of situations with a reversal of perspective. This ghost story is told not from the point of view of the castle occupants, as in traditional tales, but from the perspective of the ghost.

This resource always proves to be effective. The tale of the persecutor who ends up by being persecuted, the cheater who is cheated, constitutes the core of many humouristic stories. We find this resource in the old farces, and Bergson has expounded it: «Imagine several characters in a given situation; by reversing the situation and the roles you will get a comic scene» (Bergson 82; my translation).

In this case we have the repeated situation of a ghost haunted by humans and who ends up fearing them. In a certain passage, Sir Simon tries to make an effective entrance, he opens a door violently and a heavy jug of water falls right down on him. In another chapter a door is flung open, two little white-robed figures appear, and a large pillow whizzes past his head. We are told that the children continually stretch strings across the corridor, over which he trips in the dark, and on one occasion, while dressed for the part of Black Isaac, or the Huntsman of Hogley Woods, he has a severe fall, by treading on a butter-slide, which the twins had constructed from the entrance of the Tapestry Chamber to the top of the oak staircase.

This situation becomes more serious when the Otises create a home-made ghost to frighten the real one:

Right in front of him was standing a horrible spectre, motionless as a carven image, and monstrous as a madman's dream! Its head was bald and burnished; its face round, and fat, and white; and hideous laughter seemed to have writhed its features into an eternal grin. From the eyes streamed rays of scarlet light, the mouth was a wide well of fire, and a hideous garment, like to his own, swathed with its silent snows the Titan form (*CG* 201).

As Sir Simon has never seen a «ghost» before, he is terribly frightened, and, after a second hasty glance at the awful phantom, he goes back to his room, tripping up in his long winding-sheet as he speeds down the corridor.

Inversion leads to the paradox that the Ghost almost suffers a nervous breakdown due to his fear of humans: «The terrible excitement of the last four weeks was beginning to have its effect. His nerves were completely shattered, and he started at the slightest noise» (*CG* 202). The Ghost escapes from the Otises and, once in the privacy of his own apartment, he flings himself down on a small pallet-bed, and hides his face under the clothes.

The purpose of paradox is to arouse our curiosity. Why does a cause produce an entirely opposite reaction to the expected one? In this example, the new element for the reader is the elimination of surprise. The reaction of Mr. Otis astonishes the reader because usually, in horror stories, ghosts frighten other characters. Mr. Otis, instead, remains quiet and he considers the ghost like a normal man. Moreover, the Ghost, instead of continuing his appearances, decides to ignore human beings, something entirely surprising:

He now gave up all hope of ever frightening this rude American family, and contented himself, as a rule, with creeping about the passages in list slippers, with a thick red muffler round his throat for fear of draughts, and a small arquebuse, in case he should be attacked by the twins (*CG* 203-204).

All this leads to a process of debunking the character of the Ghost in particular and horror literature in general. As Bergson assures, «Laughter springs when something previously respected is presented as something mediocre and low» (104-105). In this case we see an extreme humanisation of the Ghost. It appears in the characteristics and weaknesses of the living, which make him closer and deserving of our sympathy: «I have not slept for three hundred years,» he said sadly, and Virginia's beautiful blue eyes opened in wonder; «for three hundred years I have not slept, and I am so tired» (*CG* 207).

In his battle with the Otises Sir Simon knows defeat, so we see him yield and recognise the supremacy of the real world over the phantasmagoric one. In spite of his initial reluctance, the Ghost ends up following the instructions of the castle owner. He removes his boots, he treads as lightly as possible on the old worm-eaten boards, and is careful to use the Rising Sun Lubricator for oiling his chains. Not only this, he is reprimanded by Virginia, who orders him to behave, notwithstanding what tradition demands. The Ghost considers this request totally out of place, since it means renouncing his own essence:

«It is absurd asking me to behave myself,» he answered, looking round in astonishment at the pretty little girl who had ventured to address him, «quite absurd. I must rattle my chains, and groan through keyholes, and walk about at night, if that is what you mean. It is my only reason for existing» (CG 206).

The horror elements are debunked, deprived from their awe and reduced to the daily level. A good example is the blood stain on the floor, which the Ghost paints daily after the Americans wash it. Lacking real blood, Sir Simon steals colours from Virginia and, for this very reason, the blood stain does not always resemble it:

The chameleon-like colour, also, of the stain excited a good deal of comment. Some mornings it was a dull (almost Indian) red, then it would be vermilion, then a rich purple, and once when they came down for family prayers, according to the simple rites of the Free American Reformed Episcopalian Church, they found it a bright emerald-green (CG 198).

Another humoristic resource frequently used is that of contrast. Often humour is based on the mixture of genres. It derives from ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion at the same time, of the clash between two heterogeneous worlds. Humour is mainly the sense of the opposite. The key to it lies in perceiving this opposition. This humoristic device is constantly shown in small details, as in a passage when a terrible flash of lightning lights up the sombre room, a fearful peal of thunder makes them all start to their feet, and Mrs. Umney faints. Mr. Otis' reaction is very mild: «What a monstrous climate!» said the American Minister, calmly, as he lit a long cheroot (1966: 195).

The use of contrast as a source of humour is continuous in the clash of cultures. The author uses the difference between the English and American mentalities to create some comic parts of the book. Americans in England are ridiculed for their atrocious slang and peculiar accents, a point noted in the story when the Otises, with typical American assumed superiority, compare the sweetness of the New York accent to the London drawl. Likewise, despite their protestations in favour of democracy, Americans were perceived to be envious of the English aristocracy. Therefore, at the end of the tale, Virginia Otis marries the Duke, which, as the narrator explains, is the reward for all good little American girls. As we can see, satire is continuous.

Finally, the change of level has to be mentioned. This kind of degradation is one of the most frequently used techniques for the creation of laughter. «A sentence will be funny if it expresses two different systems of ideas at the same time or if it mixes heterogeneous worlds» (Bergson 101). The opposite of laughter is seriousness. It consists in the conformity between thought and reality. Thus, the passing from seriousness to ridicule is very easy and any insignificant detail can provoke it. This degradation can be the transition from sublimity to lowness, from seriousness to mockery, from solemnity to informality or from spirituality to practicality. The most effective system is the lowering of tone, passing from a superior to an inferior level.

In this story, the lowering of level goes from the phantasmagoric world to the real one, from mystery to dullness, from fear to humour. The result is always that the Ghost and all that he symbolises are ridiculed. Sir Simon makes a dramatic appearance wearing his own armour:

Yet when he had put it on, he had been completely overpowered by the weight of the

huge breastplate and steel casque, and had fallen heavily on the stone pavement, barking both his knees severely, and bruising the knuckles of his right hand (CG 199).

In another example, Mr. Otis treats the ghost like a human being and he tells him that he has an excellent remedy for indigestion. He says that because the ghost yells, and he thinks that he has a stomachache. The same effect is obtained when the Ghost is reprimanded by Virginia for having killed his wife. He tries to justify his horrible crime with extraordinary reasoning:

«Oh, I hate the cheap severity of abstract ethics! My wife was very plain, never had my ruffs properly starched, and knew nothing about cookery. Why, there was a buck I had shot in Hogley Woods, a magnificent pricket, and do you know how she had it sent to table? However, it is no matter now, for it is all over, and I don't think it was very nice of her brothers to starve me to death, though I did kill her» (CG 206).

5. CONCLUSION

The Canterville Ghost is a story based on contrasts. Wilde takes an American family, places them in a British setting, and then pits one culture against the other. He creates stereotypical characters that represent both England and the United States, satirizing both the unrefined tastes of Americans and the determination of the British to preserve their traditions. Sir Simon misunderstands the Otises just as they misunderstand him, and, by pitting them against each other, Wilde clearly emphasizes the cultural clash between England and the United States.

On the other hand, the subtle use of parody looks at the horror genre in another way through the humanisation of the ghost. It can be considered that the satire of the Anglo-Saxon world is a secondary theme and that the main purpose of Wilde is the belittlement of a literary genre. It has to be noted that this work includes the majority of stereotypes of horror stories, in its characters as well as in the ambiance and the plot. Had his purpose only been to frighten or to move the reader, Wilde's capacity for creation could have produced a less conventional plot with more original and imaginative elements. It seems evident that his objective was to attack a literary form, usually considered of low quality, which was quite popular among readers.

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