

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Our Ancestors* (1979)**

Italo Calvino

OVERVIEW

Italo Calvino's *Our Ancestors* is a trilogy, consisting of *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), *The Baron in the Trees* (1957) and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). The stories are unrelated, each featuring different characters and locations, but they share fantastical elements: a viscount is split into "good" and "bad" halves; a baron decides to live in the trees; and an empty suit of armor pretends to be a man. In the spirit of traditional fairytales, there is a moral to be gleaned from each story which gives readers an opportunity to reflect on their own strengths, weaknesses, and priorities in life. It is for this reason that the collection is titled *Our Ancestors*, emphasizing the universality of human experience.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Italo Calvino (1923-1985) is considered one of the great contemporary Italian authors, known for his experimental fiction and fables. In his preface to the trilogy, Calvino describes how the intellectual climate of the time influenced his stories, from the divisions of the Cold War explored in *The Cloven Viscount* to the tension between reality and imagination in *The Baron in the Trees* and the myth of the ideal bureaucrat in *The Nonexistent Knight*. Originally published as separate works, the three stories were released as a single volume in 1960.

Each story takes place in a fictionalized setting based on the history and landscape of the Mediterranean. *The Cloven Viscount* takes place in medieval Italy, signaled by the introductory conflict of the story (between Christian and Turkish armies in Bohemia) and the feudal system that informs the viscount's relationship to the nearby village. *The Baron in the Trees* is set in Europe during the eighteenth century, as characters meet celebrated French philosophers and exchange news on the French Revolution (1789-1799) and subsequent wars instigated by Napoleon I (1769-1821) and his troops. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, we return to the Middle Ages, as the titular character is a suit of armor in French emperor Charlemagne's (747-814 AD) army.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Viscount Medardo of Terralba	A man who is split into two halves during battle
Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò	A baron who spends his life in the trees
Agululf	A suit of armor with all the qualities of a chivalrous knight

STORIES

Story 1. *The Cloven Viscount*

Split In Half Viscount Medardo of Terralba rides into battle as an inexperienced lieutenant, joining a war between Turkish and Christian armies in Bohemia. A few days later, he is cut in half by a cannonball blast. The right side of his body is recovered from the battlefield and – thanks to the intervention of the doctors – the viscount survives his injuries.

The Bad 'Un Upon his return home, Viscount Medardo's behavior is strange and cruel. He develops the habit of cutting animals, fruit, and foliage in half; he tries to poison his nephew with mushrooms; and he sentences both victims and brigands to die while presiding over a trial. This leads others to believe it is the "bad half" of the viscount who has survived.

The Viscount in Love A shepherd girl named Pamela catches the eye of the viscount, and he is determined to marry her. She resists his attempts to woo her (which are, admittedly, not persuasive: he leaves her messages in the form of animals he has pulled apart and promises to lock her away in his castle). But eventually her parents are persuaded to give her to him.

Mistaken Identities In the woods surrounding the castle, the viscount's nephew encounters his uncle on several occasions. He is perplexed by the apparent mood swings of the viscount, who is either kind or cruel. News begins to spread of the viscount's double nature, leading the villagers to believe there must be two men. There are reports of children kidnapped and chained up; others are

rescued and escorted home with sweets and flowers. Birds are shot out of the sky, but soon reappear with splints on their wings, their wounds treated.

The Good 'Un The “good” half of the viscount tells his story: he was recovered by hermits who reside in the no-man’s-land between the two battlefields. These hermits nursed him back to health, and he undertook the long journey home to the castle. Upon meeting Pamela in the nearby woods, the “good” viscount admits that he, too, has fallen in love with her.

The Wedding Day On the day of Pamela’s wedding, both sides of the viscount intend to marry her. But the “bad” half of the viscount loses his horse in a ravine and the “good” half, riding a reliable (if slow) mule, is the one to arrive on time at the church. The ceremony goes off without a hitch, but during the post-nuptial celebration for the couple, the “bad” viscount arrives and challenges his other half to a duel. It is scheduled for the next day.

The Duel The two halves of the viscount, each wearing one wooden leg to offset their missing limb, arrive in the Nun’s Field at dawn. They cross swords and are both injured, slicing each other open along their old war wounds. Losing their balance, the two halves collapse on the ground together where the halves are suddenly – explicable – recombined. The story ends with the viscount whole and healed, happily married to Pamela.

Story 2. *The Baron in the Trees*

A Child’s Rebellion Resentful of his boorish father, twelve-year old Cosimo refuses to eat snails at dinner and climbs up the oak outside his family’s house. He declares that he will not come down from the trees again, but his family assumes this is an empty threat.

Into the Garden While in the tree, Cosimo has an excellent vantage point to people-watch. During his sentry duty, he notices and subsequently befriends the daughter of a neighbor, Viola, earning an invitation to visit the family’s expansive gardens. Cosimo uses the trees to explore the nearby garden, swinging from branch to branch to avoid touching the ground.

A Father’s Death Cosimo establishes a routine: he hunts game and skins it to make his clothes, befriends a band of young fruit thieves, and furthers his education through extensive reading. With the passing of his father some years later, Cosimo becomes the Baron of Rondò, though very little changes in his day-to-day life until he meets a young Spanish woman, Ursula. He impresses her by picking a rose at the top of a tree and they fall in love.

The Wedding Proposal Ursula’s father invites Cosimo to marry his daughter and return with them to Granada. The journey, however, would require him to come down from the trees. In the end, Cosimo refuses to come down and bids Ursula farewell. In the years that follow, he is linked to several different women, including his childhood friend, Viola.

Resistance From Above When war comes to his country, Cosimo observes the scouting parties of both sides: the Austrians and the French. He refers to himself as a patriot of the woods, and upon befriendng a French outpost, decides to sabotage the Austrian forces by throwing chestnuts, tipping wasp nests and nudging the patrols into French traps.

The Death Balloon Cosimo grows older and as the years pass, he is not politically active beyond his sentry duties. Old age catches up with him. He grows ill, barely able to speak, and can no longer swing from tree to tree. On his deathbed, Cosimo notices a balloon floating by and – seizing his opportunity – grabs the anchor of the balloon and allows it to pull him up out of the trees. By the time the balloon lands, Cosimo has disappeared into the sky.

Story 3. *The Nonexistent Knight*

The Faceless Knight The emperor Charlemagne inspects his ranks and meets an unfamiliar knight dressed in clean, white armor. The knight introduces himself as Agilulf and reveals that he cannot remove his helmet because he does not exist. At the emperor’s insistence, he lifts the visor to reveal nothing inside the armor.

A Stickler for Rules When the army makes camp, Agilulf is quick to annoy his fellow soldiers by pointing out signs of negligence in their sentry and patrol duties. He meets an eager recruit, Raimbaud, who has enlisted in the army to avenge his father’s death, and his assigned squire, Gurduloo, an energetic and impulsive vagabond found on the side of the road.

The Son's Revenge During his first encounter with the enemy, Raimbaud kills the man responsible for his father's death but is nearly cut down on the battlefield. At the last second, he is rescued by a knight in periwinkle blue armor who turns out to be a beautiful woman, Bradamante. Raimbaud is struck by her bravery and beauty, falling in love with her instantly.

The Love Triangle Begins Bradamante ignores Raimbaud's pursuit of her, a decision made easier by her own interest in Agilulf. But the latter is not inclined towards romance and focuses on his duties at hand. Over dinner, he engages in a debate with his fellow knights over the merits of exaggeration: after he continually interrupts the boasts of others to correct their misspoken details, Agilulf makes a declaration of his own: all his titles and honors have come from well-documented deeds, each supported by evidence.

A Shocking Twist Agilulf gives an example of this: he claims to have received his knighthood fifteen years prior after he protected the virgin princess of Scotland from would-be rapists. Another knight challenges this claim, revealing that he is an illegitimate son of the princess; therefore, at the time she was rescued, she was not a virgin. Agilulf, unwilling to concede that his knighthood is built on a lie, decides to track the princess down for clarification.

Agilulf's Departure Agilulf leaves the military camp in pursuit of the princess and is followed by Bradamante and Raimbaud. Eventually it is discovered that her virtue was intact, and the so-called illegitimate son was her half-brother. Agilulf's pristine accomplishments are no longer in question, but the revelation arrives too late. Raimbaud finds Agilulf's armor strewn on the ground with a note bequeathing it to him: the knight has vanished.

THEMES

Duality: A central theme of *Our Ancestors* is duality: the tension between good and bad, real and unreal, the world of nature and the world of men. In *The Cloven Viscount*, for example, the dichotomy of "good" and "bad" is embodied in the two halves of Viscount Medardo, reconciled at the end of the story. *The Nonexistent Knight*, Agilulf, epitomizes the tension between the ideal and the real. His conduct and dress are spotless. But at times, when soldiers eat or sleep, engaging in mundane, human activities that are not part of any chivalric code, Agilulf is at a loss. This awkwardness underscores the impossibility of pursuing an ideal: one cannot be both human and perfect. At the end of the story, the knight dissolves, unable to reconcile the possibility of having made a mistake (a universal human experience) with his identity as "the perfect knight." In *The Baron in the Trees*, Cosimo physically retreats from society by climbing into the trees, but he resists isolation and seeks out companionship: striking up conversations, issuing challenges, and leading one-man resistance efforts against invading armies. Duality can be found in his physical isolation contrasted to his active social and political life.

Hierarchy: Social class and rank are problematized in each of these stories. Viscount Medardo is given the rank of lieutenant despite having no combat or leadership experience. This promotion, awarded only due to his social rank, proves to be disastrous, as he is soon after bisected by a cannonball. Medardo's wicked half commits several atrocities for which he is never held accountable due to his social status, inviting the reader to consider how law and justice do not apply to everyone equally. In *The Baron in the Trees*, Cosimo's peculiar behavior is permitted, in part, due to his nobility. He can afford to order books and debate with tutors. Upon inheriting the title of baron, he becomes a desirable husband for enterprising families with daughters, even though he dwells in trees. *The Nonexistent Knight's* Agilulf is the embodiment of the knight's role in society, a collection of virtues and regulations. However, Agilulf's over-reliance on social and military protocol emphasizes how dehumanizing the ideal is, as seen in the knight's alienation from his fellow soldiers.

Identity Calvino titled his trilogy *Our Ancestors* in the hopes of inspiring his readers to reflect on who *they* are and where they might see themselves in the characters he has written. The questions *who am I?* and *where do I fit in?* are prompted by each of the three stories. *The Cloven Viscount* examines the opposing natures of humanity (good and bad) through the splitting of the viscount. At the same time, it also explores the impact that an individual's actions can have on their community, and the shifting nature of public opinion. *The Baron in the Trees*, to take a different approach, is a coming-of-age story for Cosimo, who must learn how to define himself separate from his family, forging new paths through the trees. Finally, *The Nonexistent Knight* explores identity through an examination of expectation and reality. Agilulf, for example, cannot conceptualize himself outside of his code of conduct, emphasizing the "emptiness" of the ideal. Raimbaud, for his part, must spend the

second half of the story redefining himself: he has killed the man responsible for his father's death, the culmination of a desire that has been the cornerstone of his identity until that moment. Each of these stories emphasizes the personal and social aspects of identity formation, depicting characters whose "sense of self" is not static or fixed. In doing so, Calvino invites the reader to reflect on their own capacity for change.

Romantic Love: In *The Cloven Viscount*, Viscount Medardo becomes whole again through his love for the shepherd girl, Pamela, establishing love as a force for change and reconciliation. In *The Baron in the Trees*, Cosimo meets and courts two women, falling in love with them at different points in his life. While these romantic relationships do not last, they satiate a desire for companionship that defines the baron's attachment to society (despite his physical separation). In *The Nonexistent Knight*, the oblivious Agilulf is pursued by the lovestruck Bradamante, who is herself the object of young Raimbaud's affection. Bradamante's unrequited love warns against the danger of idealizing a romantic partner. The "perfect man" (or woman) does not exist, nor is love a predictable force in our lives.

Familial Love The most consistent source of love and companionship in *The Baron in the Trees* is the love Cosimo's family has for him. Although they may not understand his choice in life to remain in the trees, Cosimo's parents and brother support and protect him: they check in on him regularly, bring him food and encourage him to continue his studies. Empowered by his family's resources, Cosimo takes a keen interest in engaging with philosophy, both in conversation and his own writings. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, an eager, young soldier has enlisted in the war to avenge his father's death. His motivations to fight – love and grief – are incomprehensible to Agilulf, who is constrained by the limits of the chivalric code. These stories focus on the bonds within a close-knit family unit: love between parents and children, and between siblings. Specifically, Calvino focuses on love that adapts alongside a family unit as it changes over time. *The Baron in the Trees* shows us how familial dynamics shift as children become adults and move away from their parents, while *The Nonexistent Knight* grapples with parental death and the loss that adult children experience. Through the theme of familial love, we can reflect on universal human experiences such as maturation, aging and loss.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Viscount Medardo

Character: Viscount Medardo is inexperienced on the battlefield but arrives to fulfill his duty all the same. Following his injury, he is split into two halves: one good, one bad. Both "sides" living independently are exaggerated representations of virtue and vice, the saint-like Good 'Un and the malicious Bad 'Un. When the viscount is healed at the end of the story, these two extremes are balanced within the individual.

Illustrative Moments:

Immoral: The "bad half" of Viscount Medardo embodies his worst vices and impulses: he is sadistic and destructive, pulling animals and plants apart to mimic his own halved condition. He sends his trusted servant, Sebastiana, to a leper colony even though she is not ill, burns down the property of those who displease him, extorts money from nearby villagers, and, by his nephew's admission, kills for fun. As an arbiter of court cases brought to his castle, the viscount abuses his position of power to execute both innocent and guilty parties. Once he becomes enamored of the shepherd girl Pamela, he leaves her parents for dead, tied up among ants and bees, and forces her into an unwanted marriage contract.

Moral: The "good half" of Viscount Medardo is a caretaker, kind, selfless and generous to others. He guides lost children home and escorts widows across brooks, cares for wounded animals and plants, and leaves gifts in the windowsills of the poor. In his initial encounter with Pamela, he is respectful of her virtue and modesty, offering her shelter while he stands guard. He falls in love with her and soon wins her heart but does not pursue her until she initiates the discussion of marriage and pressures him to propose to her. When given the opportunity to kill his rival and take over the castle, the "good half" refuses, urging the conspirators not to harm their malevolent master and to choose peaceful resolution instead.

Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò

Character: Cosimo's decision to live in the trees is the result of a youthful, rebellious impulse but he

proves himself a creative and adaptive individual. He sustains himself for years in the woods, relying on ingenuity and the generosity of others to survive.

Illustrative Moments:

Adaptive: Cosimo's reputation as "the baron in the trees" stems from defiance of his father following a disagreement. The baron attempts to threaten and cajole his son into coming down by drawing attention to his responsibilities: fulfill the duties of his station, complete his studies and attend church. Cosimo does not give in, but he is inspired to adapt those responsibilities to his new circumstances. He manages his estate – to some extent – while living in the trees, engages with teachers on the ground and orders books to be delivered, and follows his family to church using a series of interconnected branches. Cosimo maps paths through the trees that go on for miles, enabling him to broaden his territory and meet new people.

Sociable: Although he is physically separated from others (unless they are willing to make the climb to him), Cosimo does not self-isolate. He is not introverted, shy, or antisocial, and has no desire to be alone. His younger brother, the narrator of the story, emphasizes the close relationship Cosimo maintains with his family from the age of twelve until his death. He pursues romantic relationships with women, courting them despite the challenges his lifestyle poses to conventional "happy-ever-afters." Cosimo continues to interject himself in moments of social upheaval because he wants to be engaged in politics, whether that be through (potentially blasphemous) philosophical conversations with religious scholars, thwarting criminals, or participating in wartime resistance as a favor to a lieutenant he likes.

Agilulf

Character: Agilulf is chivalrous and dependable as a knight, fastidious in the example he sets for others. He demonstrates an impeccable fighting form and attention to detail, prioritizing his chivalric code and his superiors' orders over anything else. While Agilulf is incorruptible, he also struggles to relate to others or to grasp the social and emotional nuances of human beings who are not – after all – mindless adherents to ideology or law.

Illustrative Moments:

The Model Soldier: Agilulf is the embodiment of chivalric virtue: he is a perfect knight, faithful to his sovereign, compelled by a sense of duty, organized and well-practiced. He holds his fellow soldiers to those high standards (alienating them due to his insistence on following protocol). He takes all orders seriously and adheres to them strictly, valuing his inspections of the kitchens as much as his combat exercises or the polishing of his armor. By the end of the story, Agilulf has ceased to exist entirely, unable to coexist with the knowledge that the legitimacy of his knighthood is in question. There is nothing else to live for.

Alienated: Agilulf does not find it easy to build rapport with others. His strict adherence to regulations earns the ire of his fellow soldiers, not only in the way he micromanages their assigned duties, but also in his obsessive commitment to exactness. Over dinner, for example, when it is customary for knights to boast about their victories in battle, Agilulf undermines these exaggerations with his own precise recollection of past events down to the date and names of the parties involved. This behavior breeds resentment among the other soldiers, leading one to make a cutting statement based on a rumor: his knighthood was a sham.