

Saki's The Open Window

Author Biography

Saki, whose real name was Hector Hugh Munro, was born at the height of English Imperialism in Akyab, Burma, on December 18, 1870, to British parents, Charles Augustus and Mary Frances Munro. His father was a colonel in the British military. Following the death of his mother, he was sent back to Devon, England, where he lived with his grandmother and aunts. In 1887, his father returned to England after retiring and subsequently traveled throughout Europe with his children. Saki returned briefly to Burma in 1893 as a police functionary but returned to England due to his poor health. He turned to writing and became a foreign correspondent, traveling in Eastern Europe and France, from 1902 to 1909, writing for *The Morning Post*. With illustrator Francis Carruthers Gould, Saki collaborated on a successful series of political cartoons. His unusual pseudonym comes from the name of a character in Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat*, a long poem by twelfth-century Persian writer Omar Khayyam. Saki is most widely known as a satirist of the English ruling classes, and his best known short story is "The Open Window." He is also famous for the character Reginald, who appears in a number of his short stories. However, though he is primarily known for his short fiction, including the volumes *Reginald* (1904), *Reginald in Russia* (1910) and *Beasts and Super-Beasts* (1914), he was also a novelist and playwright and the author of two works of nonfiction, including the historical *The Rise of the Russian Empire*. When World War I began, Saki joined the British military as an enlisted man, though due to his high social rank and education, he could have enlisted as an officer or worked for military intelligence. Indeed, he refused several offers of commission. He died in action in France on November 14, 1916 (Wilson, 197: 171).

The Open Window (Text)

"My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel," said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; "in the meantime you must try and put up with me."

Framton Nuttel endeavoured to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt

that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

"I know how it will be," his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; "you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice."

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction came into the nice division.

"Do you know many of the people round here?" asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.

"Hardly a soul," said Framton. "My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here."

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

"Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?" pursued the self-possessed young lady.

"Only her name and address," admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An undefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

"Her great tragedy happened just three years ago," said the child; "that would be since your sister's time."

"Her tragedy?" asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

"It is quite warm for the time of the year," said Framton; "but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?"

"Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favourite snipe-shooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been that

dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back someday, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window - "

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance.

"I hope Vera has been amusing you?" she said.

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

"I hope you don't mind the open window," said Mrs. Sappleton briskly; "my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you menfolk, isn't it?"

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter. To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic, he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who laboured under the tolerably widespread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. "On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alert attention - but not to what Framton was saying.

"Here they are at last!" she cried. "Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes!"

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension. The child was staring out through the open window with a dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window, they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk: "I said, Bertie, why do you bound?"

Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat; the hall door, the gravel drive, and the front gate were dimly noted stages in his headlong retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision.

"Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh, coming in through the window, "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?"

"A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs. Sappleton; "could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of goodbye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost."

"I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly; "he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her specialty.

"The Open Window": Analysis

1. Plot structure

"The Open Window" by Saki is a short story about a dual-layered practical joke a young woman (Vera) plays on an unsuspecting visitor. The plot points can be broken up according to the plot triangle as follows:

Exposition: The meeting between Vera and Nuttel before telling the story of the aunt's tragedy. Vera is introduced and evaluated. Nuttel is introduced in behavioral and psychological terms .

Complications: Vera explains the tragedy, and tells Framton that they keep the window open in memory of Mr. Sappleton. After talking with Vera for a while, Nuttel is introduced to Mrs. Sappleton. Mrs. Sappleton talks on about her husband and brothers, who Vera has just explained are dead. Framton believes Mrs. Sappleton is insane, and tries to avoid the subject of the husband.

Climax: As the sun begins setting, three figures walk across the lawn and can be seen from the window.

Resolution: Framton, frightened upon realizing the figures are the ghosts of the Sappletons, grabs his things and leaves the house to escape the assumed ghosts.

Conclusion: The family thinks Framton is crazy because he ran away, and it is revealed that the Sappleton "ghosts" are just figments of Vera's "romance at short notice" (skill at telling stories).

2. Characters

A. Framton Nuttel's sister: Framton Nuttel's sister once spent time in the same town to which Framton has come for relaxation. She has given him a number of letters of introduction with which he is to make himself known to a number of people in the town. Mrs. Sappleton is the recipient of such a letter, and it is this that brings Nuttel to her home.

B. Mr. Framton Nuttel: Mr. Framton Nuttel suffers from an undisclosed nervous ailment and comes to the country in hope that its atmosphere will be conducive to a cure. He brings a letter of introduction to Mrs. Sappleton in order to make her acquaintance for his stay in her village. While he waits for Mrs. Sappleton to appear, her niece keeps him company and tells him a story about why a window in the room has been left open. He believes her story, that the window remains open in hopes

that Mrs. Sappleton's husband and brother, who the niece says are long dead, will one day return. Later, when Nuttel looks out the window and sees figures approaching who match the descriptions of the long-dead hunters in the niece's story, he suffers a mental breakdown and flees the house.

C. Ronnie: Ronnie is Mrs. Sappleton's younger brother, who, with Mr. Sappleton, has been away on a hunting expedition.

D. Mr. Sappleton: Mr. Sappleton is Mrs. Sappleton's husband. He has been away during most of the story on a hunting expedition with Mrs. Sappleton's younger brother, Ronnie.

E. Mrs. Sappleton: Readers are first led to believe that Mrs. Sappleton is a widow, keeping vigil for her departed husband and brother, who have disappeared during a hunting trip. She lives with her young niece.

F. Vera: Vera is the niece of Mrs. Sappleton, the woman to whom Framton Nuttel plans to give a letter of introduction. She is a teller of tales; a young woman whose forte is "romance at short notice." She is an exquisite and intuitive actress, equally skilled at deceit and its concealment. While Nuttel waits with her for Mrs. Sappleton to appear, Vera relates an elaborate story surrounding a window in the room that has been left open. It is this story, of the death of some relatives who went hunting long ago, that eventually causes Framton Nuttel's breakdown. She tells Nuttel that the window is left open as a sign of her aunt's hope that the dead hunters will one day come home and provides a detailed description of the men, their behavior and attire. After Nuttel flees upon seeing these men return, just as Vera has described them, Vera invents a story explaining his departure as well. Saki refers to Vera as "self-possessed," which literally means that she has self-control and poise. In the context of this story, it is clear that this is the quality that allows her to lie so well—Vera's self-possession allows her to maintain a cool head and calm believability while relating the most outlandish of tales.

3. Point of View

"The open Window" is a third-person narrative, meaning that its action is presented by a narrator who is not himself involved in the story. This allows a narrator to portray events from a variety of points of view, conveying what all of the characters are doing and what they are feeling or thinking. For most of the

story, until he runs from the house, the reader shares Mr. Nuttel's point of view. Like Mr. Nuttel, the reader is at the mercy of Vera's story. The reader remains, however, after Mr. Nuttel has fled and thus learns that Vera's story was nothing but a tall tale. The narrator also provides evaluation of the characters' interactions.

4. The Narrator's style of presenting Vera

Saki presents Vera as self-possessed young lady. By emphasizing her manners and her young age, Saki encourages the reader to view Vera as credible and innocent. Then Saki refers to Vera as 'child', emphasizing her supposed trustworthiness and goodness. When her voice becomes 'falteringly human', readers may suspect that her story is not entirely true. However, the shift might instead make the tale more believable, showing that Vera cannot help but be overcome by the deeply unfortunate truth about her family. Thus, Saki presents a credible, young, and seemingly innocent child only to reveal her as a deceptive trickster at the story's end.

5. The narrator and Vera deceive the reader and Nuttel

Saki introduces her only as "a self-possessed young lady." By emphasizing her manners and her young age (as well as her gender), Saki encourages the reader to view Vera as credible and innocent. When her voice becomes "falteringly human," readers may suspect that her story is not entirely true. However, the shift might instead make the tale more believable, showing that Vera cannot help but be overcome by the deeply unfortunate truth about her family. The description of the party returning from their hunt recalls the supernatural motif that appears throughout the story. Not yet sure whether Framton is seeing ghosts, readers receive no clues from this description. Saki's word choice conveys a sense of gloom and horror and thus resists confirming whether Framton is seeing ghosts or living people. The men are not described as such but rather are presented as "figures" in "deepening twilight," leaving readers wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton really is as delusional as Framton thinks.

6. Vera's Motivation to lie

Vera possesses a strong desire to escape. Vera seeks escape from the adult world she inhabits through her imagination and storytelling. Like many of Saki's children, Vera is under the watch of the aunt, an imposing figure from whom she desires escape (and achieves it through imaginative storytelling and trickery). The window is a representation of this desire to escape. It is a symbolic window to a different world through which Vera can travel into an alternate reality entirely of her own making. In this way, Vera's tall tales are a means of escapism from life in the boring, adult world.

7. The structure of the "Open Window".

The most remarkable of Saki's devices in 'The Open Window' is his construction of the story's narrative. The structure of the story is actually that of a story-within-a-story. The larger "frame" narrative is that of Mr. Nuttel's arrival at Mrs. Sappleton's house for the purpose of introducing himself to her. Within this narrative frame is the second story, that told by Mrs. Sappleton's niece. The story thus has a tripartite structure. The first part begins with the meeting between Vera and Framton. The second part starts with the entrance of the aunt and the dialogue with her guest. The third part comprises the return of the hunting party and how the visitor flees. The narrator employs flashback to divide these three parts, interrupting the present with a story-within-story inspired by the girl's imagined past. The end is surprising when the reader discovers that Vera is a liar.

8. Saki's satire in "The Open Window".

Saki's stories frequently satirize and subvert the order of the Edwardian upper-middle class world of which Saki was a part. In this story, he does so by troubling and transforming the rural and calm setting of the formal house visit. Vera's story imbues the otherwise mannered and bourgeois scene with a grim tale of death and delusion. The supernatural theme invades and transforms the otherwise calm Edwardian sitting room. As the men approach the house, they are described in horror-inducing language; they are three figures that appear in the deepening twilight and noiselessly approach the house like phantoms.

9. The Symbols in the Open Window

Adult characters are frequently satirized in Saki's stories. In naming his adult characters in "The Open Window," Saki highlights their fragility: The 'Nut' in 'Nuttel' implies that he is "nutty" or mentally unstable; the 'Sap' in 'Sappleton' connotes foolishness and gullibility. The only child in the story, Vera, exploits their adult fragility for her entertainment and fools both of them through her youthful imagination. The window is at once a symbol of the aunt's hope that her husband and brothers will return and a symbol of Vera's expansive imagination. Vera uses the window as a means to escape the boring, adult world and re-imagine a more fantastical reality. The window comes to symbolize Mrs. Sappleton's anguish and heartbreak at the loss of her husband and brothers. Later when the truth is revealed, the window symbolizes the very deceit itself.

10. Irony in "The Open Window".

1. Verbal Irony

- A. Vera's name is a play on the word 'veracity', meaning 'truth'. Ironically, she is the trickster of the story, always spinning a new tale to her audience.
- B. *"She has been very interesting"* Mr. Nuttel says. In fact, he means that he learnt something interesting about her, about her supposed madness.

2. Situational Irony

- A. (against our expectation): in Saki's time girls were frequently portrayed as trustworthy and honest people. It is thus ironic that he chooses a female character to play the role of trickster and storyteller in "The Open Window."
- B. (Against his expectation): Framton retreats to the countryside in order to recover from a bout of nerves. Ironically, the countryside only adds to his anxiety and Framton is thrown into another nervous fit when he believes he has seen ghosts.
- c. The whole story is built on situational irony. The reader, like Mr Nuttel believes in Vera's story till the end; the reader is misled, deceived. He/she doesn't know what

has actually happened until the end. The situation becomes ironical in retrospect when the reader actually understood what has really happened.

D. "*I hope Vera has been amusing you*" (in fact Mr Nuttel is not amused)

E. "*The doctors agree in ordering complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise*". In fact the reverse is going to take place.

3. Dramatic Irony

A. "*One would think he had seen a ghost*". The ghosts were real people. Moreover Mrs. Sappleton was not aware at all of what was really happening.

11. Themes in the Open Window

Though it is a remarkably short piece of fiction, "The Open Window" explores a number of important themes. Mr. Nuttel comes to the country in an attempt to cure his nervous condition. He pays a visit to the home of Mrs. Sappleton in order to introduce himself, and before he gets to meet the matron of the house, he is intercepted by her niece, who regales him with an artful piece of fiction that, in the end, only makes his nervous condition worse.

A. Appearances and Reality

It is no surprise that Mrs. Sappleton's niece tells a story that is easy to believe. She begins with an object in plain view, an open window, and proceeds from there. The window is obviously open, but for the reasons for its being open the reader is completely at the mercy of Mrs. Sappleton's niece, at least while she tells her story. The open window becomes a symbol within this story-within-a-story, and its appearance becomes its reality. When Mr. Nuttel (and the reader) are presented with a contrary reality at the end of the story, the result is a tension between appearance and reality that needs to be resolved: Which is real? Can they both be real?

B. Deception

Were it not for deception, this story could not happen. The action and irony of the story revolve around the apparent deception that Mrs. Sappleton's niece practices. It remains to be seen, however, whether this deception is a harmless

prank or the result of a sinister disposition. If the niece's deception is cruel, then the reader must question the motives behind the deception practiced by all tellers of stories, including Saki himself.

C. Sanity and Insanity

'The Open Window' shows just how fine the line can be between sanity and insanity. Mr. Nuttel's susceptibility to deceit is no different from that of the reader of the story. Yet Mr. Nuttel is insane, and the reader, presumably, is not. In order to maintain this distinction, Saki forces his reader to consider the nature of insanity and its causes.

Respond and think critically:

- 1. What was your reaction to Vera and Nuttel?*
- 2. Why does Nuttel visit Mrs. Sappleton?*
- 3. What do you think Vera notices as they sit in silence and wait for Mrs. Sappleton?*
- 4. What does Vera ask Nuttel to break the silence?*
- 5. Do you think she asks this question because she is curious or do you think she has another motive? Explain.*
- 6. What is Vera's reaction to the appearance of the three men returning from the moor? How do you think this contributed to Nuttel's reaction?*
- 7. In analyzing Vera's behaviour, what might you conclude about her motives?*