The Open Window Study Guide

The Open Window by Saki

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Open Window" is Saki's most popular short story. It was first collected in *Beasts and SuperBeasts* in 1914. Saki's wit is at the height of its power in this story of a spontaneous practical joke played upon a visiting stranger. The practical joke recurs In many of Saki's stories, but "The Open Window" is perhaps his most successful and best known example of the type. Saki dramatizes here the conflict between reality and imagination, demonstrating how difficult it can be to distinguish between them. Not only does the unfortunate Mr. Nuttel fall victim to the story's joke, but so does the reader. The reader is at first inclined to laugh at Nuttel for being so gullible. However, the reader, too, has been taken in by Saki's story and must come to the realization that he or she is also inclined to believe a well-told and interesting tale.

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.

Plot Summary

Framton Nuttel has presented himself at the Sappleton house to pay a visit. He is in the country undergoing a rest cure for his nerves and is calling on Mrs. Sappleton at the request of his sister. Though she does not know Mrs. Sappleton well, she worries that her brother will suffer if he keeps himself in total seclusion, as he is likely to do.

Fifteen-year-old Vera keeps Nuttel company while they wait for her aunt. After a short silence, Vera asks if Nuttel knows many people in the area. Nuttel replies in the negative, admitting that of Mrs. Sappleton he only knows her name and address. Vera then informs him that her aunt's "great tragedy" happened after his sister was acquainted with her. Vera indicates the large window that opened on to the lawn.

Exactly three years ago, Vera recounts, Mrs. Sappleton's husband and two younger brothers walked through the window to go on a day's hunt. They never came back. They were drowned in a bog, and their bodies were never found. Mrs. Sappleton thinks they will come back some day, along with their spaniel, so she keeps the window open. She still talks of them often to her niece, repeating the words of one of her brother's favorite songs, "Bertie, why do you bound?" Vera herself admits to sometimes believing the men will all come back through that window. She then breaks off her narration with a shudder.

At that moment, Mrs. Sappleton enters the room, apologizing for keeping him waiting and hoping that Vera has been amusing him. Mrs. Sappleton excuses the open window, explaining that her husband and brothers will be home soon, and she continues to talk on quite cheerfully about shooting. Nuttel finds this conversation gruesome and attempts to change the subject by talking about his rest cure, a topic which bores Mrs. Sappleton tremendously. But she suddenly brightens up, crying "Here they are at last!"

Nuttel turns to Vera to extend his sympathy, but Vera is staring out through the open window with a look of horror in her eyes. Nuttel turns around to the window and sees Mrs. Sappleton's husband and brothers walking across the lawn, a spaniel following them, and hears a voice singing "Bertie, why do you bound?" Nuttel grabs his hat and walking stick and flees from the house.

Mr. Sappleton comes through the window and greets his wife. Mrs. Sappleton muses over Nuttel's departure that was so sudden it was if he had seen a ghost. Vera says that she believes it was the spaniel that frightened him; she tells her aunt and uncle that Nuttel is terrified of dogs ever since being hunted into a cemetery in India by wild dogs and having to spend the night in a newly dug grave.

As Saki remarks at story's end, making up stories that add a bit of excitement to life, "romance at short notice," is Vera's specialty.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Framton Nuttel has been sent to a small country town in England to recover from some type of nervous condition. Framton's doctors have told him to avoid any "mental excitement" or "violent physical exercise." He is to take a "complete rest." Framton's sister has provided Framton with letters of introduction to people she met when she had visited the same town, four years before. The sister provided the letters to counter what she knows is Framton's tendency to hide from everyone and mope. Framton is leery of meeting strangers, but has decided to venture out on a formal visit to Mrs. Sappleton, hoping that she would be one of the people his sister had remembered as being "quite nice."

When he arrives at Mrs. Sappleton's house, he finds that she is not immediately available, so he is received by her 15-year-old niece, Vera. Vera is a very confident young lady, and rather than putting Framton at ease, her manner flusters and disconcerts him, magnifying his natural tendency toward social awkwardness.

Making small talk, Vera asks him if he knows many people in the area. Framton replies that he knows no one and explains about his sister and the letters of introduction. When Vera discovers that he knows almost nothing about Mrs. Sappleton, she proceeds to tell him the tale, of what she calls, her aunt's "great tragedy."

Vera calls Framton's attention to the large, French window in the room, which is open despite the fact that it is October. Framton comments that the afternoon is quite warm for autumn, and then asks if the window has something to do with her aunt's tragedy. Vera relates that it was exactly three years ago that her aunt's husband and two brothers went hunting for snipe. They left through that very window, but they never returned, having been swallowed up by a wetter than usual section of the bog. Their little dog was lost with them. While she tells the tale, Vera becomes less self-possessed, and her voice takes on a faltering quality. She confides to Framton that her aunt believes that the men will return one day, that they and their spaniel will simply walk across the lawn and enter the house the way they left, through the open window. Vera explains that this is why the window is kept open every evening until dark; her aunt expects her husband to return, carrying his coat, and accompanied by her brothers, one of whom will be singing his customary tune when they return from the day's shooting. Vera confides, with a shudder, that she gets a "creepy feeling" on evenings such as this. When it is quiet and still, even she half expects the men to return.

Just when she finishes her story, Mrs. Sappleton enters the room, apologizing to Framton for being late in her arrival and hoping Vera has kept him good company. Mrs. Sappleton says she hopes the open window does not bother Framton. Mrs. Sappleton cheerfully explains to him that her husband and brothers have gone snipe-shooting and always come back through that window, tracking mud all over her carpets. Mrs.

Sappleton then continues talking about hunting, and how the birds are scarce, and wondering whether there will be duck in the coming winter. Framton finds her comments and the discussion about hunting "horrible" after what Vera has told him. Framton also finds it disconcerting that Mrs. Sappleton's eyes continually look past him to the open window and the lawn outside, giving him only a small part of her attention when he attempts to change the subject. Framton thinks it is unfortunate he has come to visit on the very anniversary of the men's disappearance.

While trying to change the subject, Framton blurts out to Mrs. Sappleton, under the mistaken impression she will be interested in the specifics of his ailments, that his doctors ordered him to take a complete rest, to avoid any type of mental stress, or any excessive physical exercise. Framton finishes by noting his doctors were not in agreement about what type of diet would be best for him. Mrs. Sappleton finds his conversation boring. Mrs. Sappleton suppresses a yawn, but then she suddenly becomes alert and announces that the men have arrived, at last, and just in time for tea.

Framton shivers and looks to the niece, Vera, hoping that he conveys the appropriate note of sympathy for her aunt's obvious delusion. Instead, he sees that Vera is staring through the open window with a look of horror on her face. Framton turns to follow her gaze and sees, coming across the lawn in the darkening light, three figures, one who has a coat hanging over his shoulders, accompanied by a tired spaniel that is struggling to keep up with them. Framton hears a man singing while the figures approach the house.

Framton grabs for his hat and walking stick and races out of the house without saying goodbye. Framton runs down the drive and through the front gate, without a memory of passing any of these things, and nearly collides with a bicyclist when he enters the roadway.

Back at the house, Mr. Sappleton, carrying his coat over his arm when he enters the room through the open window, announces the men's arrival to his wife and niece. Mr. Sappleton asks her about the man who just ran out of the room when they approached.

Mrs. Sappleton describes Framton Nuttel to her husband as a boring visitor who could only talk about his illnesses and who rushed off without even saying goodbye or apologizing. Mrs. Sappleton remarks it was as though he had seen a ghost.

Vera speculates to the family that it was the appearance of the spaniel that probably sent Mr. Nuttel rushing away. Vera says Mr. Framton had told her he was afraid of dogs. Mr. Framton's fear stemmed from a time he was chased into a cemetery on the banks of the Ganges River by a pack of wild dogs; he was forced to spend the night in a newly dug grave, with the dogs snarling above him. Vera comments that this would be enough to make anyone afraid.

Vera is very adept at telling stories.

Analysis

In this very short story, H.H. Munro, the author known as 'Saki,' provides a succinct illustration of the magic of storytelling: how the right story told to the right audience at the right time can alter reality. The same idea can be extended to include all the arts, defining all artists as similar to magicians, since it can be argued that all works of art 'tell a story' of some kind, and all artists have the potential to alter the audience's reality.

Framton Nuttel represents the audience; in this case, the reading public. Framton is nervous and unsure about what a new experience may hold, just like a reader may have reservations about starting a new story, and while he is willing to venture a short distance from his comfort zone, he requires some guidance and hand-holding, evidenced by his sister's letters of introduction and Vera's seemingly ordinary small talk. Like a reader with a new book, he will take the risk, but only with reassurances that the situation will be governed by well-known rules.

Vera represents the writer or storyteller. Vera's great talent is her ability to assess the nature of her audience, and she is confident that she can manipulate that audience to her will. The reader suspects that, if someone other than Framton had been the visitor on that day, Vera's tale would have been different, but just as deadly. Vera adapts her stories to fit the person hearing them. Vera also considers her own need to be entertained. Vera tells her stories to amuse herself as much as to impact her listener, which represents another comment on writers and artists, in general.

Using a skillful set-up, Saki lures the reader into his trap. The reader receives Vera's tale in the same way Framton does. There is no reason not to believe that she is relating a true and tragic occurrence or to doubt her aunt has become unhinged because of it. Framton and the reader hear the story with the same willingness to believe and to sympathize with someone else's tragedy. After all, it seems perfectly plausible.

Vera uses the real features of the room, notably the open window, and adds other realistic details to make it so: the "dreadful wet summer" that caused the bog to be more "treacherous" than usual, how the bodies of the men were never recovered from the earth that "engulfed" them, how the ground that had previously been safe "gave way suddenly without warning."

This language hints at the way the story will impact Framton and the reader, especially the phrase describing the way that previously safe ground, "gave way." Vera's story will cause Framton's sense of safety to "give way," and Saki's story will provide a sudden surprise to the reader in its conclusion. Vera again uses the technique of mixing features of the real world with her fiction when she speculates on the reason for Framton's rush from the room upon the arrival of the men. Framton's alleged experience in the cemetery in India begins with Vera's observation that "it was the spaniel" that frightened him, using the dog that accompanied the men as the anchor for her story. Once a realistic feature has been noted, she is free to spin out her story in any way she desires.

The use of the term, 'French window,' instead of 'French door,' adds to the strangeness of the story and puts the reader off balance. Technically, a French door is an interior door with glass panels that extend its full length to the floor; a French door, located on an exterior wall, is called a 'French window.' Therefore, the use of 'window' in Saki's story is technically correct. In addition, however, using 'window' in the description of the aunt's expectation of seeing the men "walk in at that window" suggests floating apparitions and a ghostly visitation, since reasonably, living men do not usually return to their homes through windows.

When the author concludes with the statement, "Romance at short notice was her specialty," he is using the word 'romance' to mean a tale of the supernatural or of characters caught up in mysterious circumstances. The author may, again, be referring to himself in the character of Vera, since Saki wrote several tales of mystery and the supernatural. Whether or not they were concocted on short notice, only he knows.

Characters

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.

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 Nuttellooks 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.

Ronnie

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

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.

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.

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 he so well-Vera's self-possession allows her to maintain a cool head and calm believability while relating the most outlandish of tales.

Themes

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?

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.

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.

Style

Structure

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.

Symbolism

The most important symbol in "The Open Window" is the open window itself. When Mrs. Sappleton's niece tells Mr. Nuttel the story of the lost hunters, the open window comes to symbolize Mrs. Sappleton's anguish and heartbreak at the loss of her husband and younger brother. When the truth is later revealed, the open window no longer symbolizes anguish but the very deceit itself. Saki uses the symbol ironically by having the open window, an object one might expect would imply honesty, as a symbol of deceit.

Narration

"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.

Tall Tale

Vera's story is essentially a tall tale. Tall tales are often found in folklore and legend and describe people or events in an exaggerated manner. Good examples are the story of John Henry and his hammer, and the story of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Vera exaggerates the significance of the open window by making it the centerpiece of a fabricated tale of tragic loss.

Historical Context

Saki does not specify when his story takes place, but it is obvious that the story is set in Edwardian England, the period of time early in the 20th century when King Edward VII ruled England. During this time, England was at the peak of its colonial power and Its people enjoyed wealth and confidence because of their nation's status in the world. The wealthy leisure class was perhaps overly confident, not seeing that political trends in Europe, including military treaties between the various major powers, would lead to World War I and the resulting destruction of their comfortable way of life. It is this complacency that Saki often mocks in his stones. "The Open Window" is set at the country estate of a typical upper-class family of the time. Wealthy Edwardian families often had country homes such as this one. Mr. Nuttel, suffering from an undisclosed nervous illness, has been encouraged to seek refuge in the country. Such a rest in the country where it was believed that a slower pace of life, fresh air, and quiet could cure those suffering from nervous disorders-was a typical method of treatment among the English before the rise of modern psychology. The formal nature of Nuttel's visit is typical of the wealthy classes of the Edwardian age. His use of a letter of introduction so as to meet people in his new community was a common practice among the upper class of the time.

Critical Overview

Saki has been known for decades as a master of the short story form. In his "Introduction" to *The Penguin Complete Saki,* Noel Coward finds that Saki's tales "are dated only by the fact that they evoke an atmosphere and describe a society which vanished in the baleful summer of 1914." Saki may belong to a particular time, and his pen may have been stopped in the trenches of World War I, but his stories have a broad appeal that continues to this day. His story "The Open Window" is one of the most frequently anthologized stones in the English language. Biographies and critical assessments of Saki's stories often treat "The Open Window" very succinctly. One reason for the comparative lack of critical attention paid to this tale, as compared to that paid to other stories whose influence has extended so far, may be its brevity. That is, critics may find it difficult to write a lengthy analysis of something that is itself only a few pages long. Nevertheless, several critics have made interesting, If brief, observations about the story and about Saki's writing in general that contribute to one of the most enduring controversies surrounding "The Open Window": whether the reader should consider Vera's storytelling an act of malice. An unsigned review in *The Spectator* of *Beasts and Super-Beasts,* the volume of short stories in which "The Open Window" appeared, says of the volume that "[a]s a handbook of the gentle art of dealing faithfully with social nuisances. . [it] is quite unique." One might consider Framton Nuttel just such a nuisance, whom Vera dispatches with great delight and efficiency. The same reviewer, however, criticizes Saki, calling him "not an immoral, but for the most part a non-moral writer, with a freakish wit which leads him at times into inhumanity." V era's treatment of Nuttel can be read as an instance of such "inhumanity." The reviewer concludes of SakI that "we like him best when he is least malicious." Though this review does not refer to V era specifically as an example of such malice, John Daniel Stahl suggests as much in his 1977 essay "Saki's Enfant Terrible in 'The Open Window'." In one of the few critical essays to address this story at length, Stahl examines Vera's status as a precocious child who is bored with the adults around her. He writes that "we have in 'The Open Window' a powerful, clever child in opposition to a weak, neurotic, suggestible adult."

He concludes that "Vera not only rejects but completely-and one might say, maliciously-dominates the feeble representative of adult life who crosses her path." In 1978, Miriam Quen Cheikin wrote "Saki: Practical Jokes as a Clue to Comedy," in which she examines the variety of ways in which Saki utilizes practical jokes in his fiction. She characterizes Vera's storytelling as a practical joke, belonging to a category of practical Jokes "made up of conspiracies that drum up sheer fun." It is not necessarily true that Vera is malicious, then, but she is, perhaps, simply bored. Nevertheless, just as the text supports various interpretations of the veracity of Vera's tale, so too does the text support various interpretations of Vera's motive for telling it.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines "The Open Window" as an example of Saki's wit and skillful social satire.

H.H. Munro, writing under the name of Saki, was first introduced to the London literary scene in 1899, and only a year later, he was becoming well known as a witty social critic. This reputation has stayed with him until the present-day, more than eighty years after his untimely 1916 death on the battlefields of World War I. Saki took his pseudonym from a reference in the poetry of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat,* which was translated into English in the 1850s. It is perhaps ironic that Saki should have drawn his name from this book of poetry which so captivated the attention of the generation ready to take charge of England in the Edwardian Age, for a main thrust of Saki's work was to make fun of the elite who inhabited Edwardian England.

Saki's reputation as a master of the short story, earned during his own lifetime, places him in a class along With Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry. But even though his fiction has drawn commentary from such notables as Graham Greene and V.S. Pritchett, in general, little critical attention has been paid to it. Some readers simply believe that Saki's work exists for the readers, not the critics, that its "exquisite lightness. . .offers no grasp for the solemnities of earnest criticism." Other readers find Saki to be merely an entertainer, at worst, one who draws light and overly contrived plots. These readers point to Saki's reliance on convenient literary tricks, such as the surprise ending found in "The Open Window," but they overlook that an able writer is necessary to make it credible.

The majority of critics who do interest themselves with an analysis of Saki's fiction focus on the funny side of his work, seeing him as a humorist or a comic writer. Alternately, he has been seen as a satirist, one who conveys a critical attitude toward British society of his time. This is not surprising considering that *Westminister Alice,* the series of sketches that brought Saki fame, was filled with biting political humor-"combustible" according to Saki's editor. Critics have also discussed the practical joke, which is Saki's most often-used comic device. As the practical Joke is such a childish prank, it has generally been seen as representing Saki's own "lost childhood." From the age of two, Saki grew up in a household comprised of his grandmother and two unmarried aunts-his father being away in India-who ruled strictly and impersonally. Of the relationship between Saki's rearing and the fiction he creates around the practical jokes played by children, Greene has said, "It is tempting. . .to see in Saki the boy who never grew up, avenging himself on his aunts." Almost all serious Saki critics have pointed to the cruel nature of Saki's characters, finding in Saki "the casual heartlessness of childhood.

Not all Saki's stories have been subject to this intense scrutiny, and "The Open Window," one of Saki's best-loved stories, perhaps best exemplifies that "indolent, delightfully amusing world where nothing is ever solved, nothing altered, a world in short extremely like our own." "The Open Window" centers around' a practical joke played by

fifteen-year-old Vera on a pompous man, Framton Nuttel, who is undergoing a "nerve cure." The girl fabricates a tale of the tragic disappearance of her uncle and cousins, exactly three years ago, and of her aunt, who nevertheless faithfully (thus insanely) awaits their return each day. The "ghosts" come home, and Nuttel makes a "headlong retreat" from this "haunted" house. It is only after Nuttel is thus disposed of that the reader finds out that Vera made the story up, in fact, that "Romance at short notice was her specialty." The story exhibits none of Saki's typical satire, a point upon which even those most arduous proponents in the Saki as satirist camp agree; for in order to have satire, a story must arouse in the reader a desire to reform a situation along with contempt for those who create these wrongdoings.

What is more at debate in "The Open Window" is the level of cruelty or maliciousness on the part of Vera in playing the joke. In answering that question, an examination of Vera and Nuttel is necessary, a feat made more difficult, however, by the brevity of the story. Yet, even in the space of scarcely 1,200 words, the personality of Nuttel, the "jokee," seems clear enough from the opening paragraphs. He is neurotic and of a self-imposed delicate psychological nature, hence his need to undergo a "nerve cure." Coupled With these limitations is a weak and suggestible will. He has come to the Sappleton house, not at his own instigation but at the command of his sister, who was worried that he would "bury [himself] down there and not speak to a living soul" Once there, he bemoans the "unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary," never questioning that very coincidence or that his hostess hardly presents the picture of a delusional widow as she "rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter." Nuttel is a bore, as well, going on in detail about his rest cure, being one of those people who "laboured under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities." If the import of these characteristics do not add up to a person who deserves to be the butt of a practical joke, the reader only needs to consider his ridiculous name.

The intent of V era plays a more crucial role in determining the nature of the practical joke. Clearly, she can have no seriously malicious purpose, for the joke has no forethought; Vera simply seized upon the opportunity of Nuttel's unexpected arrival on her aunt's doorstep. Nuttel and his awkwardness must have seemed like too much fun to pass up to this "very self-possessed young lady of fifteen," and her quick reaction and creation of the ghost story show an ultra-active intelligence and imagination. The reader also is not privy to how much time Nuttel and Vera have spent together before the story begins. She could very well have discerned his self-absorption and decided he deserved to have such a trick played on him, a point upon which most readers would agree with her!

Nuttel's uncertainty in even the most benign of social situations, evidenced by his endeavours "to say the correct something," stands in stark contrast to Vera's control of the situation. After quickly assessing Nuttel' s character, that he would make no mention of the "ghastly topic" to her aunt, she fabricates a story to fool him. The concrete details she includes-one brother's habit of singing "Bertie, why do you bound?" and her aunt's expectation of their return someday-all of which will take place, seem to confirm her

ghost story. In her retelling of the tragic day, she is even clever enough to allow her "child's voice" to lose "its self-possessed note and [become] falteringly human." Saki was also one of the few writers of his day to use elements of the supernatural, and appropriately, Vera embellishes her tale by telling Nuttel of her "creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that Window"; when her very live uncle and cousins return, she "[stares] out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes"

Vera not only fools Nuttel, but she also fools her aunt, who wonders at Nuttel's hasty departure made "without a word of good-bye or apology." Vera's answer to her aunt would seem even more unbelievable than the story told to Nuttel: that he was afraid of her uncle's spaniel because Nuttel "was once hunted into a cemetery on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave." Perhaps the gullible Mrs. Sappleton actually deserves Vera's pitying fashion of calling her" [P]oor dear aunt," the same way Nuttel deserves to have the joke played on him. Though she is not the butt of the joke, Mrs. Sappleton surely has been bested by her niece, never realizing just how "amusing" Vera can truly be. In her manipulation of both of the adults, Vera demonstrates Saki's view that "children have no power worth the name except their lies and retreats into fantasy."

The successful ending of "The Open Window" depends on its surprise but also on the reader's belief, along with Nuttel's, that Vera is telling the truth. To ensure that Vera's story will fool Nuttel, Saki makes use of many of the stereotypes and popularly held beliefs of his day. He exaggerates the unimaginative, staid world of adults, whereas Vera, like all of his children, is presented as the sole creator, the purveyor of fantasy and fun. That Vera emerges as the winner in this battle shows Saki's own defense of "the glories of a fanciful concoction against stale reality." Saki also uses the notion that girls were the more truthful sex and gives her a name that suggests truthfulness to make her tale less suspect. It is ironic that Saki used this stereotype to such effect even when he too believed that girls were less creative. He paid her a high compliment in making her an accomplished liar.

Saki must have found in Vera an effective character/trickster. A girl of the same name is the central figure in "The Lull," a story written ten months after "The Open Window." A now sixteenyear-old Vera spins a fantasy of a broken reservoir to keep a politician in need of relaxation from dwelling on politics. But "The Lull" differs greatly from "The Open Window." Not only does it have more farcical elements, including pigs and a rooster running around the politician's bedroom, but in this story the reader is privy to the hoax. "The Open Window" demonstrates a far more sophisticated joke, propelling it to the heights of a classic. Not only does it depict the age-old battle between those in power, adults, and those who must submit, children' while unexpectedly turning the usual order of tins relationship completely around. It also gives a realistic setting for the unveiling of pure fantasy. That Vera's story, blending elements of the realistic and the supernatural, is so believable attests to Saki's power as a writer. In addition to these theoretical and literary elements, "The Open Window" surely draws a good deal of its effectiveness from the knowledge in every reader that he or she has the potential to fall prey to such a clever girl and thus become another foolish Framton Nuttel.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Thomas March is a scholar specializing in 20th-century British fiction. In the following essay, he examines Saki's use of irony.

Hugh Hector Munro, who wrote under the pseudonym Saki, is well known not only as a master of the short story form, but also for the irony with which his stories are imbued. "The Open Window," Saki's most frequently anthologized story, is an excellent example of Saki's use of irony. The events of the story itself are ironic in their own right. However, Saki increases the ironic amplitude of the story by making the reader a victim of the very same hoax that Vera perpetrates on Mr. Nuttel.

Crucial to the success of this effect is the story's narrative structure. Saki employs a frame narrative in "The Open Window "; that is, he provides not just one narrative, but a narrative within another, larger narrative that places the inner narrative in context. If Vera's story of the lost hunters were the only story available, one could read it as either a ghost story *or* as a fanciful tale. But because Saki allows the reader access to the story surrounding the telling of this secondary tale, such a reading is not possible. When Vera lies to her aunt about Mr. Nuttel, and when Mrs. Sappleton does not react with horror or surprise at the return of her husband and brother, it becomes clear that Vera's story is a fabrication and that the hunters returning are not ghosts, but living, breathing men. Thus, Nuttel's horror becomes laughable, and the reader's initial reaction is to identify with Vera, deriding Nuttel for his gullibility and enjoying a laugh at his expense.

What remains unclear, however, is Vera's motivation in telling the story. As a precocious, or as Saki characterizes her, "prepossessing" child, she may be bored with the life of the parlor; her playful treatment of Nuttel might be rebellion against that boredom. Certainly, Vera has little or no respect for Nuttel, but it is more accurate to say that Vera does not *consider* Nuttel. For Vera, Nuttel is simply an audience, something with which to entertain herself; and precisely because she is a precocious child, she entertains herself in this creative, though perhaps unfortunate way, rather than by means of the conventional polite and flavorless discourse that might be expected of less enterprising girls her age. Furthermore, Vera does not know that Nuttel suffers from a nervous condition that will make the punch line of Vera's joke-the return of the purportedly dead hunters through the open window-tragic rather than amusing. Because she cannot have anticipated or intended the tragic result of her deceit, one cannot ascribe malicious intent to her.

Though Vera may be innocent, Saki most certainly is not. Unlike Vera, Saki, as the narrator's voice, *is* aware of Nuttel's nervous condition and also of the effect that Vera's "punch line" will have on Nuttel's fragile psyche. He allows Vera to "interrupt" his narrative, as it were, with her own story, knowing full well what consequences it will have. The reader, at this point, is at Saki's mercy, unaware that Vera's story is a fabrication. The reader is, in essence, no different from Framton Nuttel, receiving Vera's story as though it were the truth, tricked into suspending disbelief in her story by the trust already placed in the narrator Saki. When the hunters return, visible through the

open window, the reader's reaction is the same as that of Framton Nuttel; that is, the initial impression is that something eerie and supernatural is afoot. The suspicion of deceit may be present, but it is as yet unverifiable.

However, when Saki returns as the story's narrator, ending Vera's reign, the truth becomes obvious. Framton Nuttel makes a hasty, anxious exit, but the reader remains, still guided by Saki, and this makes all the difference. Nuttel' s only source for the truth (since he does not wait long enough to meet Mrs. Sappleton, who could easily have remedied matters) is Vera. The reader, however, has two sources of information, Vera and the narrator Saki, with Saki the primary source; after all, it is only through Saki that the reader has access to Vera's tale in the first place. When Saki returns as narrator, he provides the information the reader needs to identify Vera's story as the hoax that it is. When Saki shows Vera telling her aunt a story to explain Mr. Nuttel's sudden disappearance, the falsehood of that story identifies Vera as a young woman prone to making up stories and implies the falsehood of her previous story. The final line of the story, "Romance at short notice was her specialty," removes any remaining trust in Vera's reliability.

The irony of Vera's story is that, in spite of its being false, it has caused Framton Nuttel to suffer a mental breakdown; had he managed to remain for only a few more minutes, he would have learned the truth and, perhaps, shared with Mrs. Sappleton in a polite laugh with, or scolding of, Vera. The reader, perceiving this irony, derides Nuttel for his weakness and foolishness, shared either in the good-natured laugh that Vera has at Nuttel' s expense or in Vera's mean-spiritedness, depending on how that particular reader chooses to characterize the girl's highly suspicious motives. Saki's re-entrance as narrator at the moment of Nuttel's departure allows the reader to differentiate him or herself from Nuttel.

But Framton Nuttel is not the only one who has been taken in by Vera's tale. The reader who derides Nuttel must realize at the same time that he or she has also been susceptible to Vera's he. In fact, Nuttel may have, in his nervous condition, a better excuse for his gullibility; that is, anxious and distracted, Nuttel clings eagerly to the distraction that Vera's story provides. Though the reader is rescued by Saki from a reaction of horror akin to Nuttel's, the initial belief in Vera's tale is no different. But this intervention by Saki to provide a postscript, as it were, to Vera's story, simultaneously provides not only the evidence necessary to determine that Vera has managed to fool Nuttel and the reader but a reinforcement of the reader's luxurious position of being able to scoff at Nuttel's gullibility. This is the greatest irony of Saki's narrative. Saki forces the reader to recognize his or her own vulnerability, but by allowing the reader to remain in the drawing room, the reader can dispute that he or she was fooled in the first place. After all, the reader does not run away from the text, one presumes, as Framton Nuttel runs from the house; Saki does not allow it. Saki sacrifices Nuttel's dignity in order that the reader's dignity may remain intact-even if the reader *has* been taken in by Vera, he or she can claim to have seen it coming all along. And if the reader is, with Nuttel, the audience to the story, Saki is allied with Vera. Each is a teller of tales, each acting from suspicious motives. For Saki the narrator, like Vera, can be seen to be malicious *or* playful. In *Saki: A Life,* A. J. Langguth takes special notice of the story's final line, quoted

above, commenting that "the sentence, with adjustment for gender, might have served for his [Saki' s] epitaph."

Each is a lover of "romance," of story-telling, but each with a different effect. Whereas Vera has left Nuttel to his torment, Saki rescues the reader from a similar shame.

Source: Thomas March, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Stahl discusses the image of the rebellious child in "The Open Window. "

"The Open Window" is H. H. Munro's most frequently anthologized story, yet it has been almost entirely neglected by critics. It is a very brief story (only about 1200 words) and has the cameo quality and brisk wit so characteristic of Saki. A hasty reading of the story may confirm the opinion of those who, like A. A. Milne, believe that Saki is merely an entertainer. He is often considered a technically facile artisan whose plots, O. Henry-like, suffer from over-contrivance and whose elegance of expression is like a glaze on a thin and rather fragile pot.

Robert Drake, on the other hand, has argued for the deeper significance of Saki's work, distinguishing between the ironic and the humorous stories. In the ironic stories the unwillingness of a central character to face undesired aspects of reality (such as the supernatural, the bestial, evil) is contradicted by events which humiliate or destroy the character concerned through a direct confrontation with the undesired reality. In the humorous stories (the distinction between the two kinds being one of degree, according to Drake), a Bergsonian 'norm'-often represented by respectable, stuffy members of Society-is ridiculed by contrast with a seemingly cruel or amoral 'beyond-norm' which takes the shape of a character like Reginald or Clovis. Children, Drake says, also act as 'beyond-norm' in Saki's stories. The 'beyond-norm,' as Drake indicates, is closer to a true norm than the 'norm.'

An imaginative child faced with an adult world of dull limitation such as Saki frequently satirized will escape into a world of phantasy, a pattern not rare in Edwardian literature-see E. M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus," for example. As Roger Fry once wrote, "The daydreams of a child are filled with extravagant romances in which he always is the invincible hero." "The Open Window" is a story with all the marks of a child's wish fulfilling daydream; It is an expression of the fantasy of a child able to control the adult world-a world which is unattractive or even contemptible.

Vera, a girl of fifteen, entertains a guest, Framton Nuttel, a stranger who has just arrived for a nerve cure, for a few minutes before her aunt, Mrs. Sappleton, descends. In the brief time the niece is alone with the guest, she tells him about the aunt's tragedy: the deaths of the latter's husband and two brothers in a bog during a hunt, and her subsequent superstition that her husband and brothers will return through the open window as was once their habit. When the aunt appears and clearly expects someone to cross the fields and enter through the open window the guest is alarmed; when three figures that exactly fit the niece's description of the 'dead' trio actually appear, he panics and flees. When Mr. Sapp1eton inquires about the stranger who fled so precipitously, the niece invents a credible impromptu explanation.

Though on one level strictly realistic-the story could happen in every detail-the extreme purposeful opposition of child and adult gives the story an intensified, hallucinatory

atmosphere. Vera, at fifteen, has the articulacy of an adult but the role of an adolescent child, as the story emphasizes by calling her both "young lady" and "child." Vera's romance is almost supernaturally clever. She, the child, is vastly superior in every way to Mr. Framton Nuttel (note the nutty name, so characteristic for Saki), the adult whom she has chosen as her adversary. Vera must make several crucial judgments on which the outcome of her romance rests. She must determine that Nuttel is the sort of man too fastidious to mention or even hint at the 'tragedy' to Mrs. Sappleton, and that he will be suggestible and superstitious enough to interpret the events that follow in the light in which Vera has represented them. She must discover how much Nuttel knows about the family and the vicinity in order to safeguard herself against discovery; his ignorance is of course a prerequisite for her scheme. Her judgments are all correct.

Vera's two fantasies for the benefit of the audience are brilliant and expertly told. She is adept at deception. She combines in her tale circumstances such as Ronnie's habit of singing, "Bertie, why do you bound?," and her aunt's accustomed expectation of her husband and brothers, which will seem to confirm the truth of what she has told Nutte1; she speaks with pity and a touch of susceptibility:"

'Poor aunt. . . poor dear aunt. . . 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-'"

Not only her words but her actions as well convey what she desires to convey At the fitting moment in her tale of the three lost hunters her voice "lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human." When she has said just enough to suggest the uncanny, she breaks off "with a little shudder."

When the hunters appear on the lawn, "The child was staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes." She also knows when not to be dramatic; she presents her explanation of Nuttel's hasty departure with that calm finesse which convinces by its lack of Insistence, and adds a note of sympathy, "enough to make anyone lose their nerve," which is a perfect camouflage for invention.

Vera is in fact in total control of the events of the story. By contrast, Framton Nuttel, the central adult figure, is being controlled. He is the victim of Vera's 'romance', but he does not arouse sympathy. The first few paragraphs of the story subtly reveal that he is dominated by his sister; he doubts the efficacy of his nerve cure and regrets having to visit strangers, yet is apparently too feeble-willed to object. He is a hypochondriac and a bore: he "laboured under the tolerable wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's aliments and Infirmities, their cause and cure." As Janet Overmyer writes [in her essay "Turn Down an Empty Glass," *Texas Quarterly,* Autumn 1964], "Saki is impatient with the foibles of bores, cowards, the idle, the useless rich, those lacking a sense of humor. . . He gives them such names as Ada Spelvexit, Hortensia Bavvel, Sir James Beanquest, Demosthenes Platterbaff, and Sir Wilfred Pigeoncote-and one might add, Framton Nuttel. . . the ridiculous names and the absence of characterization In depth tend so to dehumanize them that the reader will not sympathize with them and the satire can then scathe more effectively."

So we have in "The Open Window" a powerful, clever child in opposition to a weak, neurotic, suggestible adult. On first reading, the story may well appear to be a tale of the supernatural; at the latest by the last line that impression has been replaced by an amazed recognition of the truth of the statement, "Romance at short notice was her specialty." But the story has not become more realistic by an elimination of the supernatural; it has merely become more fantastic in another sense: it has taken on the quality of a daydream, a fantasy. The intensity of the story is also increased by the contrast between its content and its tone; the events of the plot, the deception and the intimation of supernatural horror are reminiscent of Poe (e.g., "The Cask of Amontillado") but the tone of the story does not emphasize the Gothic element for its own sake Like Vera in presenting her inventions, the narrator presents unostentatiously and economically just what is necessary for his effect. At times, In fact, author and central character bear such similarities to each other that they merge; we as readers may be less likely to be frightened by the figures on the lawn, but if we are unacquainted with the ways of Saki's imagination, Vera's story on first reading has the same capacity to fool us as it does for Nuttel.

Vera's romance is a clever practical joke of the highest caliber-without wires, strings, or mechanical contraptions. If, once we are initiated, the story appeals to us, if we laugh or feel any satisfaction at Framton Nuttel's hasty exodus, we are most likely participating in a fantasy that is peculiar to the mind of a child, and particularly a frustrated child, who is powerless to resist the encroachments or dictates of a cruel or boring adult world. According to Janet Overmyer, children In Saki's stories often are "cruel to adults because the entire adult world is against them, and they are helpless to resist. They must therefore snatch their revenge whenever the opportunity arises."

The Impulse behind practical jokes often arises from urges against authority or the established order of things. The wishful fantasy of a child desiring to play havoc with adults is widespread. In one of Jack Harkaway's stories (a series of 'penny dreadfuls' for boys that began In 1871, the year after Munro's birth, and continued up to the end of the Victorian era) an episode occurs which bears some relation to intrigue of Vera's kind. Here, as quoted by E. S. Turner [in *Boys Will Be Boys]:*

Fighting apart, there was little to do at Pomona House school except to rag as graceless a set of pedagogues as ever gathered under one roof. Jack, being a ventriloquist, had a head and shoulders start over the others By causing Mr Mole to say 'Frogs!' and 'Waterloo!' to M. Bolivant, the French master, he succeeded in making these excitable gentlemen fight in front of the class. Then the Head, Mr. Crawcour, entered and the fun really started.
'What is this?' exclaimed Mr. Crawcour. 'Mr Mole with his fists clenched and Mr Bolivant on his back Disgraceful! How can you expect boys to be orderly when they have such a bad example? Gentlemen, I am ashamed of you!'
'Shut up', said Jack making his voice come from the senior master.

Such practical joking is, like "The Open Window," an entertaining fantasy but it is also symptomatic of a fascination with the domination of the adult world by a preternaturally powerful child.

That extraordinary children have a peculiar attraction and meaning for Saki is immediately evident on reading a cross-section of his stones. Munro's own early life has provided grounds for comparison with Thackeray, Kipling, and Dickens, writers "who never [shook] off the burden of their childhood." Munro was born in Burma, taken to England after his mother's death, when he' was around two years old, and was raised by a household of women at Broadgate Villa in Pilton, North Devon. Drake writes of his childhood home: "This establishment was presided over during [Hector's father] Major Munro's nearly perpetual absence in the East by his mother and his two sisters, Charlotte ('Aunt Tom') and Augusta, fierce spinster ladies who ruled with an authoritarian hand and whom Saki depicted again and again in his stones with a mixture of hatred and affection." Greene emphasizes Munro's unhappy childhood in relation to his writings, and Drake, with some reservations, makes the point too: "It is tempting. . . to see in Saki the boy who never grew up, avenging himself on his aunts and possibly his sisters." . . .

"The Open Window" certainly supports S. P. B. Mais' claim, made in 1920 [in *Books and Their Writers],* that "Munro's understanding of children can only be explained by the fact that he was' in many ways a child himself; his sketches betray a harshness, a love of practical Jokes. . . a lack of mellow geniality that hint very strongly at the child in the man." Framton Nuttel unquestionably belongs to the vapid adult world of the Gurtleberrys, but unlike Mrs. Gurtleberry's niece, Vera of "The Open Window" has not acquiesced to this world. Vera's practical joke is of a kind with the moonlight hen-stealing raid, which remains after all only the fantasy of Mrs. Gurtleberry's niece. Vera not only rejects but completely-and one might say, maliciously--dominates the feeble representative of adult life who crosses her path. . . .

Source: John Daniel Stahl, "Saki's Enfant Terrible in "The Open Window" in *The USF Language Quarterly,* Vol. XV, nos. 3-4, Spring-Summer, 1977, pp. 5-8.

Adaptations

Richard Patterson directed a film adaptation of "The Open Window" in 1971. Produced by the American Film Institute, it is a 12-minute short.

In 1980, *The Open Window/Child's Play* offered video interpretations of two of Saki's short stories. It is 28 minutes long and available in VHS format from Monterey Home Video.

"The Open Window" was also adapted for video in 1990, available in VHS format from Pyramid Films & Video.

Topics for Further Study

What different things does the open window in the story symbolize to the characters? Give some other examples of symbols that mean different things to different people.

Has the country provided Mr. Nuttel with a respite from his nervous condition? What does this say about the nature of his nervous condition?

When and how do readers know that Mrs. Sappleton's niece has been lying? Once it is revealed that she has been lying, can you find anything earlier in the story that, in retrospect, might seem like a clue to her deception?

Try to formulate a theory about why Mrs. Sappleton's niece would behave in this way. Is she sinister? Bored? Both?

Compare and Contrast

1910s: A rest in the country is often recommended for those city-dwellers suffering from nervous disorders.

Today: Though many people take vacations to relieve stress, the "rest" cure is an antiquated treatment for nerves. Commonly, doctors prescribe medication.

1910s: In polite society, letters of introduction were a common means by which to make oneself known in a new place. Letters of this kind served to guarantee that a move to a new home did not isolate someone from the community.

Today: Most people meet by chance in school or at work rather than through the pre-arranged situations, although dating services and personal ads are common.

1910s: Hunting is a popular sport among the English wealthy classes in the Edwardian Age.

Today: Hunting is a popular sport among all social classes and it is seldom used solely as a means of obtaining food.

What Do I Read Next?

For more of Saki's fiction, consult *The Penguin Complete Saki,* published by Penguin Books in 1982, originally published by Doubleday in 1976. The volume includes not only Saki's short fiction but his novels and plays as well.

E. M. Forster was a contemporary of Saki's and, like Saki, is known for his satirical portrayals of the English middle- and upper-classes. His "The Story of a Panic," published in *The Celestial Omnibus,* is a good example of his work.

Like Saki, O. Henry is a master of Irony and the surprise ending. His short story "The Gift of the Magi" is famous for its ironic surprise ending.

P. G. Wodehouse's many humorous stories of English upper-class life include those collected in *The World of Jeeves.*

Another tall tale, like that told by Mrs. Sappleton' s niece, is found In Mark Twain's story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," published in 1865.

Further Study

Cheikin, Miriam Quen. Review in *English Literature in Transition* Vol. 21, no. 2, 1978, pp 121-31.

A review refuting the consensus that Saki focused on childish themes, devices, and cruelties, and supporting the author as a practical joker.

Langguth, A J. *Saki A Life of Hector Hugh Munro* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981, 366 p.

A biography containing anecdotes and analyses of Saki's fiction.

Spears, George James. *The Satire of Saki' A Study in the Satiric Art of Hector H. Munro* New York: Exposition Press, 1963.

Spears addresses the novels, plays, short stories, and political satire of Saki. He begins with a short chapter entitled "The Satiric Tradition" that provides an introduction to the context within which he reads Saki's work.

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Coward, Noel. "Introduction," *The Penguin Complete Saki* London: Penguin Books, 1982 Reprint of the 1976 edition by Doubleday & Company.

Review entitled "Fiction: 'Beasts and Super-Beasts'," in *The Spectator* Vol. 113, no 4489, July 11, 1914, pp. 60-1.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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