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## **Wickedness in the Guise of Courtesy: A Critical Reading of “The Open Window” by H.H. Munro alias Saki**

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### **Abstract**

The short story, “The Open Window” by H.H. Munro, covers the strange way in which Framton Nuttel’s visit to Mrs Sappleton ends. The ordeal Framton Nuttel faces in the course of waiting for his host suggests that the innocent-looking Vera turns him into a cynosure of everybody’s laughter through a wicked lie that unfolds like a ghost story. Based on his personal experiences as a person who was born to Scottish parents and bred in Burma and had later joined the English community in Britain, Munro suggests that, in the Victorian-Edwardian society of England, strangers were not respected as fellow human beings.

### **Keywords**

Framton Nuttel; Vera; “The Open Window”; H.H. Munroe; Saki.



## **Introduction**

The eccentric hypochondriac Framton Nuttel starts living in the country on the advice of his doctor who treats him for his present nervous condition. His sister who lived in the area some four years ago has given him some letters of introduction to his new neighbours and he appears at Mrs Sappleton's with such a letter. The short story, "The Open Window" by H.H. Munro, covers the strange way in which his visit to Mrs Sappleton ends. The ordeal Framton Nuttel faces in the course of waiting for his host suggests that the innocent-looking Vera turns him into a cynosure of everybody's laughter through a wicked lie that unfolds like a ghost story. Based on his personal experiences as a person who was born to Scottish parents and bred in Burma and had later joined the English community in Britain, Munro suggests that, in the Victorian-Edwardian society of England, strangers were not respected as fellow human beings.

## **Vera Breaking the Ice**

At the onset of the short story, H.H. Munro introduces Vera as "a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen" (Saki 50). He means by the epithet "self-possessed" that Vera is a "self-confident, self-assured, assertive, calm and composed, resourceful and well-prepared" (Bernardo) personality. So sharp in her perception of people she seems to have realized at a glance that she is far smarter than her interlocutor Framton Nuttel who comes there as a perfect stranger. She receives him with a subtle sense of cynicism. Although Framton, who becomes the victim of her fun later, does not perceive it, she poses a challenge in her suggestion, "My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel ... in the meantime you must try and put up with me" (Saki 50). In ambiguous terms, she implies that she is a person difficult to handle and he has to get ready for a test while spending the time with her in the absence of her aunt.

## **Framton Nuttel Betraying his Sense of Insecurity**

As soon as he appears at Mrs Sappleton's, Framton Nuttel betrays his grotesque neurotic behaviour through his hesitation about how to communicate

with Vera. Munro emphasizes Framton Nuttel's sense of insecurity about himself through his struggle "to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come" (Saki 50). This suggests that he has not been an outspoken social person all his life and in front of strangers, he is usually shy and reticent. Also he has a great lack of pragmatics as somebody grown up confined to his home. Maybe this is the first time he is away from his family. However, his scepticism about the benefit he would have from this type "formal visits on a succession of total strangers" (Saki 50) with regard to his "nerve cure" (Brando) is reasonable. Yet, naively faithful and obedient to his sister, he is now only trying to satisfy a moral obligation to the latter.

I know how it will be ... 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 (Saki 50).

These kind and considerate words from his sister ring in his ears and he is now compelled to follow them as a fraternal obligation. His sister has got to know the people the letters are addressed to while living in the village rectory. From this it is speculated that his sister is married to a pastor and the family is basically religious and spiritual-minded. In Victorian-Edwardian England, such people generally do not crack practical jokes, tell lies, ridicule the others, and simply do not cause an iota of pain to others. So Framton Nuttel comes from a tradition of innocence and moral integrity. While he is in this rural retreat, he musters up his courage to visit Mrs Sappleton, considering that she is one of the "nice" ones his sister has mentioned.

### **Vera's Inventiveness Versus Framton's Credulity**

Iconologically, the rectory and Mrs Sappleton's country house respectively provide two contrast exposures to life. Holy statues, decoratively lettered

excerpts from scriptures in picture frames, the general outlook of the inhabitants of the house including the pastor in cassock and the response they receive from the public altogether, engendering peace and harmony, are supposed to create a serene environment of virtue in the rectory where there is no room for contempt, cynicism or sadism. On the contrary, Mrs Sappleton's bizarre house has a gothic "masculine" atmosphere open for hunting, butchery and frivolous behaviour, where there is a tendency that piety and peace of mind are often taken for granted. This is very well implied in the mess Mrs Sappleton expects to be created by Mr Sappleton and her two brothers who are supposed to appear in muddy boots and with guns under their arms, after an expedition on snipe hunting in the marshes.

As two persons living in these two specific residential environments Vera and Framton are likely to cultivate two contrast attitudes to human relationships. Vera from her bizarre environment may have adopted elements of cunning and corruption and Framton from his cosy and carefree religious environment may have cultivated an innocent complacent attitude to life. The upbringing they have both had in their respective environments becomes clear in the interview between them. "Do you know many of the people round here" (Saki 51)? Having "judged that they had had sufficient silent communion" (Saki 51) Vera asks Framton her very first question as a test. This is to find out how vulnerable he is. "Hardly a soul," (Saki 51) answering, Framton falls an easy victim to her and gives a full account of his situation where he has to get to know people by visiting them with letters of introduction from his sister. "He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret" (Saki 51). Munro suggests the regret he feels while divulging all his helplessness to mean his disappointment without the person he has aimed at meeting. Already he starts feeling that he told too much to the girl. "Then you know practically nothing about my aunt" (Saki 51)? By and by Vera digs into Framton's helplessness, calculating how well she can trick him. "Only her name and address," (Saki 51) his answer provides her a

golden opportunity to put a wicked plan into action. Framton is not focused on anything and keeps “wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state” (Saki 51), and that allows Vera to formulate her strategy to harass him. With a full grasp of Framton’s demeanour as a gullible, naïve, plain and cowardly man, Vera tries to take him for a ride. If any symbolic value is to be found in her name, Vera means “true”. But she does not stand by truth in her dealings with the other people. Munroe achieves an irony by naming her Vera.

### **Vera’s Ghost Story**

Engendering tremendous pathos into the lonely atmosphere of the living room, Vera utters first, as if she is acting in a play, “Her great tragedy happened just three years ago ... that would be since your sister's time” (Saki 51). She rouses Framton’s curiosity by the pseudo-sentimental tone she has adopted in making a theatrical opening for a tragic story. “Her tragedy” (Saki 51)? The question Framton poses suggests that he is utterly curious to know what happened to Mrs Sappleton three years ago, or Vera has already attracted an enthusiastic audience for her self-test as a storyteller. She simply manages here to take her listener to an event that took place in the past. Then she relates it to the present with the intention of turning the narrative into a ghost story.

“You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon” (Saki 51), she says, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn, just to build up a connection between the so-called tragedy and the present situation of the house. By means of this question, she approaches Framton cunningly in order to victimize him as the subject of a practical joke. The question implies that, rather than telling a story straight away, she carefully elicits from Framton whether he is seriously listening. “It is quite warm for the time of the year ... but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy” (Saki 52)? Framton is correct and rational to base his explanation on the weather, but the impact he receives from Vera’s tone makes him vulnerable. His question on the relationship between the so-called tragedy and the open window

is something Vera expected from him, in order to continue her story. This really helps her manipulate him as an object of fun. Each word she utters thereafter reaches him with so much of power that prevents him from waking up his brains and makes him surrender the whole of his discretion to her. She just drives his imagination into a ghost land along with his curiosity about the connection between the tragedy and the open window.

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.  
(Saki 52)

She attaches an ominous value to “the window” through the inversion “Out through that window” that emphatically opens her story. Just referring to the three men, who are right at the moment on a “snipe-shooting” expedition, she invents her tragic story. “They never came back.” This short simple sentence appears with so much of resonance just after a long one with several adverbials to mark the tragic element in the narrative. In fact it is the key sentence in the narrative. The other sentences that describe how they got “engulfed” in the mire while “crossing the moor”, how the unpredictable weather became hostile to them, and how they got buried there for ever, are just to convince Framton that what she is telling is true. The images of violence and mystery achieved through the terms “shooting”, “a treacherous piece of bog”, “engulfed”, “without warning” and “dreadful”, are sure to influence Framton’s imagination that has already been affected by the frightening reference to “the window wide open”.

Vera’s outstanding performance as a storyteller culminates at the point when she wears a façade of emotionalism. Munro suggests that her “voice lost

its self-possessed note and became falteringly human". Pretending to be a loyal and considerate niece, she starts in a low voice to describe the meaning of the window being kept wide open. She uses the epithet "poor" to describe her aunt as a woman haunted by the ghosts of the dead in her story. "Poor dear 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" (Saki 52).

In reality the three men who have left the house together with the little brown spaniel on a snipe-hunting expedition are supposed to appear at any moment in the evening and she exactly describes what her aunt feels about them. The three men and the dog, who are alive by all means, are now introduced to Framton as dead. Her ominous explanation to the window as a passage open for ghosts embarrasses him with fright. "That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk" (Saki 52). This statement dispels Framton's rational thinking about the hot weather as the cause for it and leaves him in a world of fantasy. The graphic description of the snipe-hunting team presented in sentimental terms suggests how they look and behave in their imminent entrance through the window. "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" (Saki 52)?

This is the climax of her narration. She implies this particular evening is likely for the dead to appear though she presents it as "a creepy feeling" or a weird imagination. Her conclusion is made with a physical sign only. "She broke off with a little shudder" (Saki 53). The mimetic effect of her gesticulation of fear is so powerful on Framton that he struggles to recover from confusion with ghosts until Mrs Sappleton's arrival. Framton's morbid mental state and the anticipation Vera causes in him for a groups of ghosts to appear creates in him a dilemma as to whether he should stay on and get tortured to death by a group

of ghosts or he should run away from the haunted Sappleton property and violate the custom and etiquette of the Victorian-Edwardian England.

### **Mrs Sappleton's Inadvertent Confirmation of Vera's Account**

As Framton's sister has mentioned to him, Mrs Sappleton proves to be a friendly and cheerful person. Munro introduces an element of dynamism into the lethargic atmosphere through her agile behaviour. The clause "the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance" that contains terms of motion suggests that she is a lively character in general. "I hope Vera has been amusing you" (Saki 53). The remark Mrs Sappleton makes ironically conveys her fear about Vera's tendency to invent stories in front of strangers. "She has been very interesting" (Saki 53). Framton's response nullifies her qualms about Vera's falsehood known to the family.

I hope you don't mind the open window... 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? (Saki 53)

Mrs Sappleton's allusion to the situation that is to transpire in the living room in a few moments is almost an accurate repetition of what Vera used to be telling Framton in her absence.

Vera has set the scene in such a way that every word Mrs Sappleton "cheerfully" utters about "birds", "shooting" and "winter" resonates in Framton's ears like details of a horror story and every gaze she makes at "the open window and the lawn beyond" revives his horrible imagination of the cruel deaths the three men and the dog who died in the horizon.

So traumatized by Vera's story, every minute he spends there, he finds himself getting more and more pathetic. "It was certainly an unfortunate coincidence that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary" (Munro, 53). Munro suggests that Framton is in the belief that, at the moment, the house

is just getting ready to receive right on their third death anniversary the ghosts of the three men and the dog whom Vera has introduced as dead three years ago.

### **Framton's Reaction to "Imminent Delusion"**

Juxtaposing the two portrayals of the "three men and the dog" presented by Vera as ghosts and Mrs Sappleton as live individuals, Framton who has no reason to disbelieve either, concludes that in a while the identical expectation expressed by them both, the young woman and the old woman, in their respective stories would materialize. This could be an adventure for a brave and self-confident man who would be inquisitive about the veracity of the ghost stories spread all over the world. There are many people who like to experiment with such beliefs and descriptions. But, lacking in self-confidence, the neurotic patient Framton considers it too unbearable for him to experience the reincarnations of the four dead individuals. That is why he announces, with so much difficulty in communication, the type of atmosphere the doctors have prescribed for him to live in. "The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise..." (Saki 53).

In the real sense this is an excuse to leave the place before the three men and the dog arrive, as he notices an element of cheerfulness in Mrs Sappleton's anticipation of their arrival and an element of sorrow in that of Vera's, who both claim that the three men and the dog would arrive any time that evening. He cannot finish talking about the medical advice he received on his dietary matters because those who are supposed to have been dead attract the attention of Mrs Sappleton who has been alert to their arrival for some time.

Her deviation from Framton's dull accounts of his medical condition to the exciting arrival of her husband and his companions is quite natural. "Here they are at last! ... Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes" (Saki 54)!

Mrs Sappleton of course means that Framton is welcome to join her in witnessing the bizarre behaviour of her husband and the others. She indirectly attempts to cheer him up and make the atmosphere manageable for him to join the men. Yet Vera's fabrication has so strongly influenced Framton's imagination that Mrs Sappleton's genuine cheerfulness sounds to him as an expression of lunacy generated by an emotional attachment to the dead. More intimate with Vera, Framton sympathetically shares with her the horrible information conveyed in her story. Vera does not withdraw from the stand she developed in her wicked lie. She pretends to be horrified by the impending appearance of the individuals whom she introduced as dead. "The child was staring out through the open window with a dazed horror in her eyes" (Saki 54). In a few words Munro establishes how cleverly she sustains the myth she created at the expense of Framton's gullibility.

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?" (Saki 54)

This vivid description of the just actualizing reality represents only a repetition of what Vera falsely reported in terms of a hallucination that had been expected to transpire for the last three years and what Mrs Sappleton truly predicted in terms of a ritual that would transpire any moment. Framton is confused whether the spectacle of the three men and the dog is real or delusive. Unable to disbelieve Vera or Mrs Sappleton or his own eyes, he starts wondering as to what he should do. Whatever it is, with no energy to put up with any sort of adventure, Framton simply tries to escape from the scene, having "grabbed wildly at his stick and hat". Further Munro depicts how chaotically and desperately he behaves in his

run for life. “A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision” (Saki 55). Altogether this situation provides a classic application of dramatic irony.

### **Vera’s Evasion of Suspicion**

While running away from the scene, Framton becomes a subject of surprise and laughter for the others. “Who was that who bolted out as we came up” (Saki 55)? Mr Sappleton sounds amused by Framton’s unceremonious departure. “A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel ... 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” (Saki 55).

Mrs Sappleton’s reply conveys her surprise and puzzlement about Framton’s departure. Out of flabbergast, she calls him “a most extraordinary man” on calculating his strange behaviour. Quite commonsensically, she observes a relationship between Mr Sappleton’s arrival and Framton’s departure, and surmises that it was precipitated by his fear of ghosts.

In his absence, Vera exploits the potential of what is called “information gap” to convince everybody that Framton ran away in fear of the dog. It makes up an easy pretext that would provide a satisfactory answer to their query about the unusual behaviour of their visitor or the reason for his disappearance “without a word of goodbye or apology”. Though it is not accompanied by any histrionic device as before, the story she relates to this effect is as convincing as the previous one, as it appropriately satisfies the curiosity of the audience that is busily engaged in preparing for tea and celebrating their meeting in the evening after a day-long outing away in the marshes.

I expect it was the spaniel ... 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. (Saki 55)

In this newly fabricated story, the man lying “in a newly dug grave” and the pack of mongrels “snarling and grinning and foaming just above him” would create a spectacle for everybody to sense the traumatic fear of dogs Framton is supposed to have been affected with. “Enough to make anyone lose their nerve” (Saki 55).

Vera herself provides an explanation to make it easier for the others to decide what really led to Framton’s sudden disappearance. “Romance at short notice was her specialty” (Saki 55).

The concluding remark Munro makes as an explanation to Vera’s nature, draws attention to the central position she occupies in the short story, although she is not the protagonist.

### **Conclusion**

In Andros Pope’s words, “The Open Window” by Saki is a “slice-of-life story of irony that is typical of Saki” (Pope 2011). The characters of Vera and Mrs Sappleton are blunt and witty while that of Framton Nuttel suits its hypochondriac nature. Together they develop a story that exemplifies how chaos occurs in communication due to clever falsification. It spoils Framton’s courtesy call to Mrs Sappleton, upsets Mrs Sappleton’s hospitality to Framton in the name of her old acquaintance, misrepresents the living in that household as dead, misintroduces Mrs Sappleton as a haunted woman, convinces the entire household that Framton is crazy, and replaces friendship and goodwill by horror and evil. When the story structure is analyzed by applying Gustaf Freitag’s pyramid reproduced by Griffith (43-46), it is understood that an unstable situation develops from the psychological numbness Framton Nuttel suffers on listening to Vera’s disastrous ghost story associated with the place where he is right at the moment. The mood that develops on the arrival of Mrs Sappleton who unintentionally confirms Vera’s falsification leads to a rising action. The climax occurs when Mr Sappleton and the crowd appear at a distance and almost simultaneously Framton runs away in fear of their ghosts. Soon this is followed by a humorous conversation among the members of the household about

Framton's unbecoming behaviour. It marks the falling action after the climax. Munro's explanation to Vera's cleverness as an impromptu inventor of stories forms the denouement. Munro calls the collection of stories in which "The Open Window" originally appeared *Beasts and Super Beasts*. So anybody would understand whether the generic terms "beasts" and "super beasts" suit in labelling the characters of the naive Framton Nuttel and the crafty Vera respectively in a classification developed for identifying the Victorian-Edwardian community under various personality traits. According to Karen Bernardo, this quirky but dark tale exemplifies the brunt of the Victorian's hatred of the outsider and effectively conveys the sense of "otherness" felt in that society. The hypocrisy behind Victorian-Edwardian politeness is efficiently exemplified in the innocent-looking Vera acted by Charlotte Ritchie in the cinematic production of the short story by James Rogan (2004), under the title *The Open Doors*. The film articulates the Victorian-Edwardian social atmosphere so clearly that a student of literature from any part of the world can perceive it with a sense of the subtle coldness the story attempts to project.

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