

Before You Read

World Literature
England



The Open Window

Meet Saki

(1870–1916)

What if, as a child, you were locked away in a country house with two strict, bickering aunts as your guardians? How would you satisfy your desire for diversion? If you possessed the satiric humor, wit, and writing talents of Saki, you might have found satisfaction as he did, by writing stories.

Childhood Trials Hector Hugh Munro (Saki's real name) was the third child in an upper-class English family. He was born in the former British colony of Burma. When his mother was pregnant with her fourth child, the family returned to England, but she was killed in an accident before giving birth. Saki's father decided to return to Burma. He sent his three children to live with his mother and two unmarried sisters in an English village.

Saki's aunts were not at all suited to caring for children. They imposed strict rules and constantly quarreled with each other. Saki never forgot his childhood experiences and many of his stories would have tyrannical aunts and young children who wreaked havoc on adults.

From Burma to London When Saki was twenty-three, he took a position with the military police in Burma. He was enthralled by the region's exotic landscape, especially the wild animals. Munro's fascination with and respect for animals emerges as another repeated feature of his stories.

When he contracted malaria, Saki returned to England. When he was well, he moved to London to pursue his literary career. In 1900 his first work, *The Rise of the Russian Empire*, was published.



"The best stories of Munro are all of childhood, its humor and its comedy as well its cruelty and unhappiness."

—Graham Greene, from *The Best of Saki*

Finding Success Also in 1900, Saki began writing captions for political cartoons. It was at this time that he took his rather surprising pen name, the single name Saki, an allusion to the *Rubáiyât of Omar Khayyám*, a famous epic poem.

Saki was able to focus solely on writing short stories from 1909 until 1914, when he joined the army to fight in World War I. Saki was mortally wounded on a French battlefield. However, his literature lives on. Saki's stories and three novels have been published in the volume *The Complete Works of Saki*, and they continue to delight readers today.

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Author Search For more about Saki, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL59794u1.

Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Short Story

Has your first impression of someone ever turned out to be wrong? Freewrite for a few minutes about a time when you were mistaken about a first impression.

Build Background

"The Open Window" takes place in the early 1900s at an English country house set on an estate with hunting grounds. At the time of this story, it was not unusual for upper-class families to welcome into their homes strangers who brought with them a letter of introduction from a mutual acquaintance.

Set Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Encountering the Unexpected

As you read "The Open Window," ask yourself, How does Saki use the twists and turns in the story to manipulate not only the story characters but his readers as well?

Literary Element Flashback

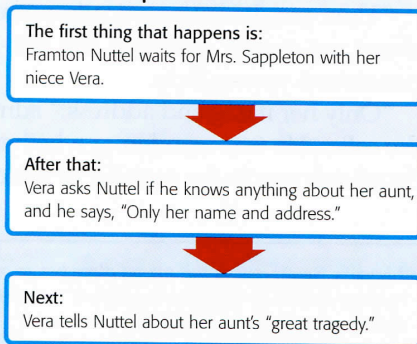
A **flashback** is an interruption of the chronological order of the story to show an event that happened earlier. As you read, ask yourself, How does Saki use flashback to give information that helps explain the main events of the story?

Reading Strategy Identify Sequence

To **identify sequence** is to recognize the order of events in a literary work. As you read, ask yourself, What clues or signal words point to the chronological, or time, order of events?

Tip: Organize Events Use a sequence chart to put important events in the story in chronological order.

Sequence of Events



Learning Objectives

For pages 10–16

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing flashback.

Reading: Identifying sequence

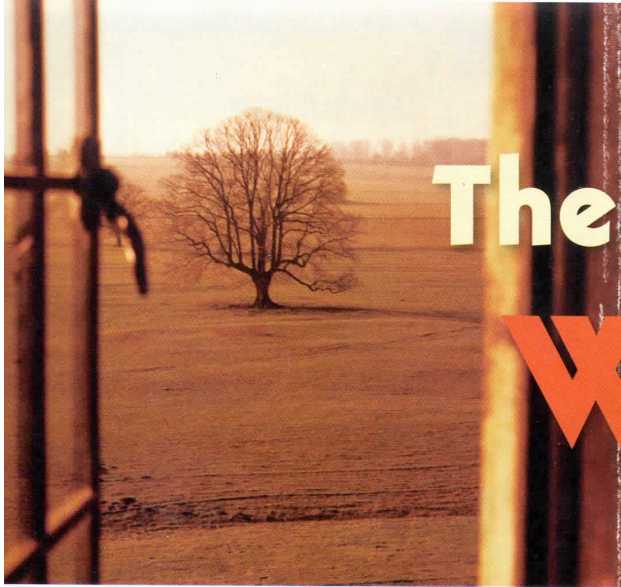
Vocabulary

self-possessed (self' pə zest') *adj.* in control of oneself; composed; p. 12 *Many people were nervous, but she was completely self-possessed.*

duly (doo' le) *adv.* rightfully; suitably; p. 12 *He was duly impressed with the grand house.*

infirmity (in fur' mə tē) *n.* a weakness or an ailment; p. 13 *He once was a vibrant, energetic man, but age and infirmity had slowed him down.*

imminent (im' ə nənt) *adj.* likely to happen soon; p. 14 *Dark, thick clouds are gathering, and rain seems imminent.*



The Open Window

Saki

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

Framton Nuttel endeavored to say the correct something which should **duly** flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

"I know how it will be," his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; "you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of

introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice."

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

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

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

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

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

"Only her name and address," admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed

Flashback *What background information does this flashback provide?*

Vocabulary

self-possessed (self' pə zest') *adj.* in control of one-self; composed

duly (doo' lē) *adv.* rightfully; suitably

Identify Sequence *Is this taking place before or after Framton Nuttel's arrival at the Sappletons' home? Explain how it relates to the flashback that precedes it.*

state. An undefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

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

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

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window¹ that opened on to a lawn.

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

"Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favorite snipe-shooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog.² It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back some day, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing, 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on

1. A *French window* is a pair of door-like windows hinged at opposite sides and opening in the middle.
2. A *moor* is a tract of open, rolling, wild land, often having marshes. *Snipe* are wetland game birds. The men here are hunting snipe.

still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window—"

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

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

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

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

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

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who labored under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and **infirmities**, their

Identify Sequence What is the sequence of events that leads up to Nuttel wanting to change the topic?

Vocabulary

infirmity (in fur' mē tē) n. a weakness or an ailment



At the Window, 1894. William Merritt Chase. Pastel and paper, 18.5 x 11 in. Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY. Gift of Mrs. Henry Wolf, Austin M. Wolf, and Hamilton A. Wolf.

View the Art What qualities might the girl in this drawing share with the niece in the story?

cause and cure. "On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

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

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

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

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window; they all carried guns under their

arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk: "I said, Bertie, why do you bound?"

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

"Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh,³ coming in through the window; "fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?"

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

"I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly; "he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah⁴ dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make any one lose their nerve." Romance⁵ at short notice was her specialty. 🍷

3. A *mackintosh* is a heavy-duty raincoat.

4. The *Ganges* is a river in northern India. A *pariah* is one who is shunned or despised by others. In India, where dogs are not highly regarded, packs of wild dogs are considered pariahs.

5. Here, *romance* means "tales of extraordinary or mysterious events."

Encountering the Unexpected Why does Saki wait until the last line of the story to tell readers that telling tales was Vera's specialty?

Vocabulary

imminent (im' ə nənt) *adj.* likely to happen soon

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. What was your reaction to Vera and Framton Nuttel?
2. (a) Why does Framton Nuttel visit Mrs. Sappleton? (b) What do you think Vera notices as they sit in silence and wait for Mrs. Sappleton?
3. (a) What does Vera ask Framton Nuttel to break the silence? (b) Do you think that she asks this question because she is curious, or do you think she has another motive? Explain.
4. (a) What is Vera's reaction to the appearance of the three men returning from the moor? (b) How do you think this contributed to Nuttel's reaction?

Analyze and Evaluate

5. (a) How might Vera's poise and self-confidence contribute to her being believed? (b) In analyzing

Vera's behavior, what might you conclude about Vera's motives?

6. The author subtly plays with the theme of hunting in this story. How is Vera like a hunter and Framton Nuttel like her prey?

Connect

7. **Big Idea** Encountering the Unexpected

A surprise reversal of events is a common theme in Saki's stories. How does Saki employ this theme in "The Open Window"?

8. **Connect to Today** Would you like to be friends with Vera? Why or why not? Use details from the story to support your opinion.

Literary Element Flashback

ACT Skills Practice

1. How does the author create an opportunity for Vera to tell her lengthy flashback?
 - A. The event she describes occurred three years earlier.
 - B. The hunting party is late returning.
 - C. Vera speaks rapidly and dramatically.
 - D. Mr. Nuttel has to wait some time for Vera's aunt to appear.
2. How does Vera's fanciful flashback have ironic consequences?
 - F. Vera's aunt is puzzled by Mr. Nuttel's abrupt departure.
 - G. The hunting party looks exactly the way Vera described it.
 - H. Visiting his neighbors does nothing to help Mr. Nuttel's nerves.
 - J. Mr. Nuttel believes every word of Vera's tall tale.

Review: Plot

As you learned on page 8, **plot** refers to the sequence of events in a story.

Partner Activity Meet with a classmate and work together to identify the plot elements of "The Open Window." Working with your partner, create a plot diagram like the one below. Then fill it in with specific events from the story.

