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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SAKI'S *THE OPEN WINDOW*

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ABSTRACT

*The Open Window* is an amazing short story that can be interpreted like any other piece of literature from different perspectives. The story as such carries little action and is concerned simply with a comical situation. The writer has wittingly tried to debunk some of the basic misconceptions of the contemporary society. Maybe this is his style of elaborating and dissecting the contemporary mores and manners. One thing that stands out in the story is his choice of words and phrases which amply suit the events of the story. There is hardly anything superfluous and the characters seem to comply with the basic strands of the plot. In this Saki has come out as a deft craftsman and the story is not just a specimen of his art but is also considered to be one of the best tales told in English language. The overall environment of the story extols a spirit of joy and mirth. Apparently, there are only three characters the reader encounters in a short span of a couple of hours and yet Saki has beautifully delineated different aspects of their personality and created a complex of events. Rest he leaves to the learned reader and his discretion.

**Keywords:** parody, daydreams, joy, mirth, life

Introduction

There can be no two ways about the fact that Mr. Nuttel is a flat character. One important aspect about his personality is his relationship with his elder sister. Not much has been talked about their relation but the way the narration appears to highlight the dictates of his sister and the way he obediently follows her injunctions corroborates with the fact that she has a reasonable hold over his personality. She simply seems to rule over his imagination and actions. Moreover, the man is a kind of automaton and acts like a puppet. In every family there are people who are protected or so to say overprotected by their elders and in doing so these elders unwittingly hinder the personality development of such people. Saki has depicted this very aspect of grooming in a very limited space of that of the plot of a short story could provide him with. So, what can he or for that matter any such person does in similar circumstances? The trouble with such relations in general is that these pampered souls are taken good care of only as long as they comply to the behavioural expectations of the elder member. What if he revolts against such a guiding control over his life? Does he stand a chance of liberation? It is difficult to make conjectures and even the author has not made any attempts to venture in this direction and yet one can get some advice from the following statement;

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Finally, if you have a committed relationship or family of your own, you can focus on providing that which you'd like to be getting from your family of origin. Focus on what you share with them, and on what you can provide to yourself in your own life, and you'll be better able to accept familial quirks. (Scott)

In any case, he is one-dimensional! A character simply devoid of any genuine faculty of observation and deep understanding. He seems to be living in his own world of make believes. As he is introduced to the reader, one can sense his artificial approach to life in the sense that he is not practical. He has an inability in his behavioural patterns that prevent him from interacting with the outside world, the people and the social gatherings as such. Such an individual is an apt choice for parody. One can hardly stop laughing at varying instances when he is confused or is being be fooled by the young girl. His behavior is so erratic that there are times it seems as if he is a completely concocted character, a figment of Saki's imagination, with no verisimilitude with reality.

Given a choice, no human being in their sane state of mind is going to choose chaos over calm and Mr. Nuttel is no exception. His only desire in life seems to be in a state of peace. He seems to be sick of meaningless strives and struggles of life and almost like a recluse he intends to live a life of serenity away from material desires, at least for the time being. This is but natural and a common phenomenon in modern times. Saki has almost predicted the coming decades when people would be doing all sort of experimentations with their personal social and religious dogmas in order to establish or rather reinvent new means of leaving.

Moreover, it is natural for every generation to try and create their own mechanisms to adjust to the changing times. This young man, however, seems to be bereft of any significant mental faculty that could keep him safe through the tumultuous current of life. He is a specimen of a stunted personality. Mr. Nuttel could be rich; his family may well easily provide for his living but he himself is not bright enough to handle his life and its challenges without the help of his sister. This is the travesty of everything, an absurdity and a very stark irony!

One issue that Saki picks up for contestation is that the change of place can be a free panacea of all tensions and release from all sort of negativity and complexities of modern human existence. It is usually depicted as if merely shifting to some new destination would sort out all the troubles of ailing hearts. Saki has an in depth understanding of human psychology and he knows that it is not a matter of change of place but a rectification of issues with the wrong pattern of observation, analysis and thinking that makes a person feel better.

The young man shifts to this new setting on insistence of his sister. He seems to be suffering from some mental disorder not specified in the story. It appears as if he has some neural breakdown or better to put it, he seems to be suffering from generalized anxiety disorder. As the story goes, he quite unfortunately for him ends up knocking at the door of a house where instead of feeling better, he's going to get his already perturbed nerves tested by a melodrama of ghostly appearances. This debunking of the ideologized medical advice by Saki is not just funny but appropriate and congruent. His message is simple; people everywhere are all the same and it does not make any difference whether you live in one place or another, in one town or another. It is true that the live in some areas is comparatively less complex and slow but things do not go beyond this as there are all kind of people everywhere like there alter egos everywhere else.

One aspect of the behavioural anomaly in the young girl can be traced to something that is variously defined by psychologists as overthinking or daydreaming. The young girl is not to be treated as a negative character as such, but for sure she is not a well-groomed child for whatever reason. Is a child supposed to make fun of elders? Is she supposed to behave with a stranger the way she did in the story? How far is her aunt responsible for her behavior? How come she has the freedom to talk the way she did with Mr. Nuttel? How come she's not afraid of the consequences of her behavior and there are many such questions that come to the mind of a cursory reader!

Daydreaming is the place, researchers say, where the mind can imagine a future for itself, make an internal home for "realising our deepest desires and strivings," and figure out who we really are and what we want. This is critical to ensuring a happy and secure adulthood. Yet we rarely give kids the opportunity

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to slow down enough to reflect on the past or imagine the future. Life is often moving too fast, and there are too many interesting things competing for our attention. (Korbey)

Day dreaming as a positive trait may well open different vistas for an observant mind. It might initiate affirmative and progressive decision making by assessing the inputs at hand, and this quality makes a person proactive and they may get into a sanguine state of mind owing to their ability to always welcome challenges and difficulties with open arms. Such people are the path breakers for they are the ones who are always self-motivated and their dynamic activities in-turn promote intellectual clarity among others also.

It may seem odd or a paradox, but children (and adults) can actually *focus* on their day dreams, and some of these daydreams may be more inventive and ultimately more useful than the task at hand. So let's not be quick to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Day dreams are a highly creative form of mental engagement and a necessary way for children-- lacking real- world experience-- to process complex information and emotions. (Fries)

Such a person would always be self analytical and this state of mind will help them in problem solving with the tranquil approach like the young girl. She appears to be a special tool at the disposal of the writer for promoting a certain aspect of his ideology. She is basically an explication of a concentrated mind which has evolved for itself, a guaranteed formula for success through the ability of vigour and delightful deliberations.

Mrs. Sappleton who is in absolute oblivion about the ghostly tale that Vera has fermented behind her back appears to be a sorry figure to Mr. Nuttel. The irony of the situation cannot be more awkward because it is Mrs. Sappleton who eventually ends up describing the young man as strange and fearful stranger and 'a most extraordinary man' (Saki 51). Still the cock and bull story about the lady's husband and her brothers, although told in a very amusing way, brings out the puny stature of human beings vis-à-vis nature. The way they are being described as being lost does create tension in the mind of the reader, at least until he comes up with the veracity of the narrative. It is a fact that nature reigns supreme and there are instances of natural calamities resulting in mass destruction and loss of valuable lives. It is another issue whether these natural calamities are a result of man-made imbalance in nature! As it is usually perceived that man's greed for accumulation of wealth and resources usually leads to disasters. There are multiple instances of the same, the recent being the flood situation in many parts of South Asia. Saki in line with Robert frost, has highlighted the malignant aspects of nature through this tale within tale. Even if it is not about the human caprice, destiny does play dice with humanity. There are instances of quick change in fortunes and then there are characters in literature who are forever trapped in quagmires of fate. Mrs. Sappleton for one moment resembles strikingly with Maurya of JM Synge's *Riders to the Sea*!

The title of the story is highly metaphoric as an open window can mean multiple things to different people in different circumstances. But the import must be seen in relation to the story itself. On a positive note, an open window describes the alluring vistas of opportunities that one may covet. It is about the liveliness and animation which life provides humans with. In this way it may also be read as a fantasy of escape. Whether the renowned writer intended it to be so or not can never be reduced but from the stand point of Mr. Nuttel it can be surmised to be so given his condition.

Of course, it is meant to be a comic tale but the element of supernatural horror as sprinkled by the young girl's tale gives it an altogether different hue. The comic aspect of the story cannot be overruled and yet the final impression after reading it is not that of humour or relief. One is rather left wondering over serious philosophical questions pertaining to certain unique human conditions. It turns into a poignant commentary on fragility of human plans. At this point one cannot help thinking about the futility of false pretensions and egoistic show offs. The train of thought meanders into unguarded terrains!

At the same time, one may wonder about the significance of the three presumably doomed characters. These are happy figures who know nothing about what is being said about them. They are completely oblivious of what has transpired in their home in their absence. There seems to be a message that Saki intends to convey through them that life without too much complications, unnecessary cogitations and meaningless and futile

philosophising is worth living. All one needs to do is to get up at right time, move out of their homes and enjoy their day. They seem to convey that one need not be very rich to lead a fulfilling and cheerful existence, but one must be rich in spirit and vivacity in order to be alive in life. They represent people who know how to live every moment of life oblivious of whatever others think of them and whatever conspiracies are hatched behind their back. This is probably the most significant aspect of this short story and a serious reader would get his message by reading between the lines as when they return from their holiday expedition, they are full of energy and completely living in the moment.

Researchers who have pored through data, including vast medical records and hundreds of in-person interviews and questionnaires, found a strong correlation between men's flourishing lives and their relationships with family, friends, and community. Several studies found that people's level of satisfaction with their relationships at age 50 was a better predictor of physical health than their cholesterol levels were. (Mineo)

These three shadowy figures seem to show the way do a good life as they are the husband and brother-in-laws all well connected among themselves and their family. They do know how to spend their holidays together and how to share their cheerful glories and gloomy nights. This is how life is supposed to be led not the way the young gentleman is trying to. This contrasting approach amply clarifies Saki's stand and at the same time reinforces the significance of humans as social animals.

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