

# Fact, Fantasy and Fiction: A Critical Evaluation of H. H. Munro's *The Open Window*

**Kakali Ghosh**

State Aided College Teacher (Category-I)

Department of English

Mankar College, Mankar, West Bengal, India

Email: kakalienglish.92@gmail.com

**Abstract**— *The Open Window* by Hector Hugh Munro is a short story. The principal interest of the story lies in the prank played by a fifteen-year-old teenager Vera upon a stranger namely Framton Nuttel who comes to the countryside for his nerve cure. As is the characteristic of a teenager, Vera yearns for something thrilling. And so, she frames a tragic story of her aunt Mrs. Sappleton's husband and her brothers going to hunting never to return so that Framton takes it for truth. Not only this she adds a sense of the supernatural around the house through her story. So, the article seeks to make an analysis of the representation of fact, fantasy and fiction in the story. In the story the act of hunting for the sake of mere amusement is transformed into a tragic life story of Mrs. Sappleton. So, facts and fantasy merge in Vera's framed story within the story. Then the writer incorporates various autobiographical elements into the story. Thus, the facts regarding the writer's own life experiences merge with the fictional elements of the story. Within these scopes the author also makes a satire on the then upper-class society by exposing their so-called sophisticated manners and deception. Then the distinction between the appearance and reality is brought into the forefront. And all these are analysed in some detail in the article.

**Index Terms**— The Open Window, tragic story, facts and fantasy, sophisticated manners, appearance and reality.

## I. Introduction

H. H. Munro, better known by his pen name Saki is a famous British writer who has left a significant contribution in the arena of short story writing. In *The Dictionary of National Biography* Godfrey Elton writes about the stories of Munro - "...their often fantastic settings are not drawn closely from life; but their elvish humour, their biting and eccentric wit give them an individuality which is unforgettable, and in the art of the unexpected phrase Munro was a past master" (Davis and Weaver, *Dictionary of National Biography* 397). *The Open Window* is widely regarded as the best short story of H. H. Munro and this story exemplifies all these traits. In a way the story has a great deal of connections with Munro's real-life experiences, but here he endow the story with an unnatural or uncanny setting coloured by the fantasy of the young girl Vera.

In *The Open Window* the elements of fact and fiction are merged in a way that calls for a number of explorations regarding the story. The story revolves round the adolescent fantasy of a fifteen-year-old girl Vera who is an excellent storyteller and thus conceives an instant story by looking at the open window blending her power of imagination with the facts involving the day's events. She tells her forged story to a stranger namely Framton Nuttel who comes to that place for his nerve cure as he has been suffering from some nerve related issues (not specified clearly). Though he personally knows nobody there, he has with him the letters of introduction provided to him by his sister. After a kind of formal exchange of greetings Vera now forge a story associated with the tragedy of her aunt and her family members and tactfully manipulates him to believe in all her narration. Not only this she even creates an imaginative story about the experience of Framton in India when he was attacked by a pack of dogs. In this way the elements of fact and fantasy are merged by the girl. Again, the fictional elements of the story as a whole are mixed with the real-life experiences of the author. Thus, the fact, fantasy and fiction are combined in *The Open Window*, and this could be explored in some detail.

## II. Scope of the Research

The research makes a critical evaluation of H. H. Munro's short story *The Open Window*. It makes an analysis of the story within the story and seeks to explore the dialogue between the embedded story and the story as a whole and also the dialogue between the overall narrative and the autobiographical elements along with the Victorian upper class social milieu.

## III. Blending of Fantasy with Facts in the Embedded Story of Vera

As a character it is Vera, the fifteen-year-old teenager who remains at the centre of *The Open Window* of Munro. It is she who makes a fool of all including Framton and Mrs. Sappleton. She mixes the facts regarding her family members with her fictional account very carefully and step by step. As a self-possessed young girl, she is also a very skilful actress and that finds its revelation at different points of the story. From the very beginning she advances very tactfully as the stranger Framton Nuttel comes to her house to pay a visit to Mrs. Sappleton for the sake of his nerve cure. And so, she uses her formal greetings associated with their sophisticated society as a part of her plan to deceive the stranger – “My aunt will be down presently...in the meantime you must try and put up with me” (Saki, *The Open Window* 294). By means of her words she wants to suggest that he must listen to what she says during the absence of Mrs. Sappleton as she will be a little late in meeting him. Her use of words “put up with me” also implies that she will be engaged in something mischievous while he is there sitting with her and he has to endure her mischief though unknown to him.

A little later Vera breaks the silence by asking him whether he knows the people there. And when he answers in the negative, she immediately knows the fact that her plan will succeed very well without any doubt or intervention from the part of the listener. She feels immense joy when she utters these words – “Then you know practically nothing about my aunt” (Saki, *The Open Window* 295). And thus, Vera thrives on Framton's ignorance of the place and its people and transforms the day's simple events in connection with the people going to hunting to some grim, nerve-racking tragedy - “Her great tragedy happened just three years ago” (Saki, *The Open Window* 295). And here again she becomes very careful in narrating the story as she says that the tragedy happened after Framton's sister had left the place implying that his sister thus remains unaware of the tragic story associated with Mrs. Sappleton's family. Though at first Framton is a little startled hearing of tragedy in that peaceful countryside, he becomes easily duped by Vera's manipulation. Then she points at their French open window that she says is kept open on an October afternoon as Mrs. Sappleton lives with the expectation that her dead husband and brothers will come through that window. She says that one day they went for hunting but then perished in a treacherous bog and there was no trace of their body. Here the narrator presents her in a way that may be said of a skilful actress – “Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human” (Saki, *The Open Window* 295). Thus, indirectly Vera presents her aunt as insane as even after the death of her family members she hopes that they will return to their house through the open window. And at the end of the story, she shudders a little thus showing again her artificial nature.

At the end, she surpasses seemingly all her limits when she lies to and befools all her family members by telling a lie again regarding Framton. She says, - “I expect it was the spaniel,...he told me he had a horror of dogs” (Saki, *The Open Window* 297). And she does not stop at this point, rather adds another imaginary story of Framton's being chased and attacked by a pack of dogs in India.

## IV. Significance of Vera's Story

Vera's transforming an ordinary day's events to tragedy can suggest appearance vs. reality. Her fabricated story signifies the fact that what seems true to someone may not be true at all and so one should be cautious in the matter of believing something as true. Like Framton the reader also is befooled by her and believes her story to be true. It is only after Mrs. Sappleton's husband and brothers return after hunting that the reader comes to know of the falsity of her story while Framton is totally unable to suspect anything of her story and behaves in a way as if “...he had seen a ghost” (Saki, *The Open Window* 297). This signifies in general that reality is something different from outward appearance and in particular it is a reference to the broad gap between the superficial manners and the reality associated with the people as well as the Victorian society as a whole. Likewise, her framed story Vera's nature also symbolises this same binary and the reader at last can

find a gap between her inherent nature and outward appearance. Her losing control of her voice, shudder, the “dazed horror in her eyes” (Saki, *The Open Window* 297) – all are the revelation of her dual nature. In this way the writer shows the huge gap between the appearance and reality. So, under the guise of her simple and innocent nature there lurks the nature of her deception, falsity and superficiality.

While all these negative traits in association with Vera’s character may be true, there can be other interpretations of her nature and that also cannot be ignored and require the readers’ attention while assessing her framed story. Probably as a teenager or young girl she seeks to revolt against the adult members of her family. It can be that she does not like too much dominating nature of the adults and that is why she wants to make fool of all of them. So, not only to the stranger Framton, but she also lies even to her own family members. In many of Munro’s stories adults are satirized and here also the teenager mocks at the foolishness and fragility of the adults. The “Nut” of Framton Nuttel suggests the fact that he is “nutty” or mentally unstable. In the same way, the “Sap” of Mrs. Sappleton may be a reference to her foolishness. Thus, by befooling each and every grown-up people including her family members Vera seeks to turn the tables though it is not very clear whether she does so seriously or only for the sake of mere amusement. It can also be that she wants to experience some delight or seeks to draw some relief as she does not like her boring so-called sophisticated life amidst the adults. Thus, she wants to subvert the so-called Edwardian manners also seeks an escape from it through her youthful imagination. Again, at last it must be said that Vera, the young girl has possessed some extraordinary traits and talents that find its expression in her framed narrative – her creative and imaginative power, her ingenuity, her self-possessed nature, her art of storytelling and acting. All these extraordinary traits are well summed up in the last line by the narrator – “Romance at short notice was her speciality” (Saki, *The Open Window* 297).

## V. Vera’s Dual Nature and the “Victorian Compromise”

Vera’s name may be a play on the word “veracity” that means “truth”. But contrary to her name she represents falsity and deception though apparently, she seems innocent and trustworthy. Her dual nature represents the distinction between the appearance and reality. And this trait of Vera signifies a specific tendency of the people of the people as well as society in the Victorian era what was famously called Victorian Compromise. The term was first coined by Lawrence M. Friedman and then introduced and discussed by G. K. Chesterton while assessing the Victorian English society. There was a huge gap between what seems apparently a peaceful idealistic and morally conscious society and the society in its reality with all its negative aspects. Thus, in a way Vera’s dual nature reflects the Victorian Compromise.

## VI. Symbolic Suggestions of the Titular Open Window

The titular open window is at the centre of the story. Vera frames her story centring on this. And she transforms the story in such a manner that their Edwardian sitting room with its open window has something eerie and supernatural around it. These lines suggest the supernatural sense in the best possible manner – “In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window,... Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk “I said, Bertie, why do you bound?” (Saki, *The Open Window* 297). Thus, the open window is imbued with a sense of the supernatural by her art of imaginative storytelling.

The open window also signifies the hope of Mrs. Sappleton that her husband and brothers will return to her. But for Vera it acts as a symbol of escape from the adults. It symbolises her dream world free from the control of the adults. She wants to breathe the fresh air, and the open window signifies the open fresh air. She wants to create her own world of fantasy and imagination, and the open window is the symbolic reference to all these.

## VII. *The Open Window* and the Autobiographical Elements

The characters of the story are drawn from the upper-class society to which Munro belonged. Not only this, but the story also makes a representation of some of the family members of the writer. Thus, Vera represents child Munro. The writer’s aunt Augusta Munro becomes Mrs. Sappleton in the story. In the same way the image of Saki’s (Munro) sister Ethel Munro has been drawn through Framton’s sister, that of Munro’s uncle Wellesley Munro through Mr. Sappleton (husband of Mrs. Sappleton) and that of Munro’s brother Charlie

Munro through Ronnie Sappleton (Mrs. Sappleton's youngest brother). But while the characters in the story represent different individuals of reality, fact and fiction are merged in creating these characters. Thus, young Saki is depicted through Vera who is a girl. Again, Munro's sister Ethel is represented through the character of Framton's sister (in accordance with the relationships in the story she should have been Vera's sister). Thus, incongruity can be seen in every fictional character and their original counterparts. Thus, fact and fiction are merged in the creation of the characters of the story.

After the death of his mother Munro was brought up by his grandmother and two aunts. It has been known that there were large French windows leading to a large yard in the estate of Saki's aunt and more or less this same image is drawn in *The Open Window*. Incongruity can be seen also in the creation of the character of Vera's aunt and her real counterpart. In the story Vera's aunt keeps the window open while Saki's aunt Augusta used to keep her windows closed. Thus, as a young child Saki and his siblings used to yearn to breathe in the fresh air and this finds reflection in Vera's longing to remain out of the adults' control and the titular open window signifies this longing. Vera's account of Framton's being "in a newly dug grave" "on the banks of the Ganges" (Saki, *The Open Window* 297) might be an echo of Saki's hearing from his father of the murders and open graves of the British military victims in the time of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. So, again the reader can see the weaving of facts with fictional elements in the story.

### VIII. Reflection of the Victorian Era Society along with its Social Milieu

In *The Open Window* the reader can find reflection of various elements drawn from the Victorian society. In the story Vera tells the story to the stranger Framton Nuttel who has been suffering from some unspecified nerve disease. Framton's sister says before his migration to the countryside "...your nerves will be worse than ever from moping" (Saki, *The Open Window* 294-295) and this becomes an instance of dramatic irony as quite unknown to her that becomes the fact with Framton Nuttel. The reader can see him mentally more shattered after he senses something eerie and supernatural after he sees the missing family members of Vera's story. Then while telling the story, Vera implies the strain of insanity of her aunt. It has been recorded that towards the end of the Victorian era or more specifically after the death of Queen Victoria there was the increase in the number of mentally unstable people, and this finds its representation in the character of Framton Nuttel. As the setting Munro has chosen an English country area that apparently seems tranquil and peaceful. But irony lies in the fact that this very place leaves Framton mentally more unstable. Again H. H. Munro himself belonged to an upper-class society and his family as well as the social milieu associated with his class or society find its reflection in *The Open Window*. Then he also satirizes the Victorian (and Edwardian) upper class society to which he belongs. Though he mocks the Edwardian bourgeois lifestyle, he himself used to pursue the same lifestyle. He has drawn an image of an English upper-class family sometimes between 1880 and 1905. He makes a fun of the superficial manners, affectations and the overall social milieu associated with his class. For example, at the beginning of the story the writer pokes fun at Vera's greetings to Framton when she seeks an excuse from him as he will have to spend the time with her (Vera) because her aunt will be a little late. Not only does he make a fun of greetings he presents her greetings with an ironical tone. Vera's formal and polite greetings serves as a cover or mask for her superficial nature implied in her mischief. Though there can be some justification in Mrs. Sappleton's astonishment at seeing Framton's leaving them without any words of goodbye or apology to them as her husband and brothers return home, they are too much concerned about the so-called sophisticated social manners. Thus, he ironically portrays his upper-class society with all its artificiality, superficial manners and lack of sincerity. Again, he presents Vera as a fifteen-year-old girl. Thus, he breaks the stereotype of a girl (also young girl) being innocent and trustworthy. And this young and seemingly innocent girl is actually a liar who thrives on the ignorance of an innocent and mentally unstable man. In this way the writer makes a distinction between appearance and reality characteristic of both the Victorian upper-class people and the society as a whole.

### IX. Conclusion

Thus, the story *The Open Window* revolves round the fifteen-year-old girl Vera who lives with her aunt Mrs. Sappleton. And she tells her imaginative story to Framton blending the facts regarding her family members with her forged account of them. Thus, the combination of the fact and fantasy can be seen in Vera's imaginative story centring on the open window. Also, the fictional element of *The Open Window* is full of autobiographical resonance in many ways. Vera's story along with her deceptive innocence marks the distinction between the appearance and reality characteristic of the Victorian era. By incorporating the

autobiographical elements into the story, the writer also mocks the Victorian and Edwardian society (with all its affectations and so-called sophistication) of which he himself was a member. So, fact, fantasy and fiction are woven together with mixed results in Saki's *The Open Window*.

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