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“Children are Given us to Discourage Our Better Instincts”: The Paradoxical Treatment of Children in Saki’s Short Fiction

Ruth Maxey

- 1 The short fiction of Saki (Hector Hugh Munro), first published in six volumes, features numerous child characters.¹ In this respect, as in his use of imperialism and the animal kingdom as literary themes, Saki owes something to Rudyard Kipling (Drake 1962, 11; Pritchett 1963, 614; Greene, 99-102; Allen, 85; Hanson, 34-5).² His sparkling style recalls the epigrams of Oscar Wilde (E.M. Munro, 40; Chesterton, xii; E. Waugh, viii; Pritchett 1965, 99; Fogle, 83, 91; A. Waugh, ix), while the influence of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll can be discerned in Saki’s taste for the surreal (Chesterton, xii; Pritchett 1963, 614).³ For some commentators, his cold dissections of wealthy Edwardian society echo the fiction of Henry James (Lambert, 40; Pritchett 1965, 98); for others, his work foreshadows the social comedy of P.G. Wodehouse and Evelyn Waugh (Fogle, 83-5; A. Waugh, viii). One could also argue that Saki’s writing anticipates the subversive, macabre short fiction of Roald Dahl, which draws similar inspiration from unexpected, anti-authoritarian complicities between children and animals (Dahl, 7-31; Warren, 13-16).
- 2 While critics and writers have traditionally placed Saki within the kind of genealogy of English writing outlined above, his unique status has been just as strenuously claimed (Walpole, viii, xii; Knox, 14; Spears, 12, 22, 58; Overmyer, 171; Gillen, 158; Allen, 86; Fogle, 92; Seymour-Smith and Kimmens, 2279; Self, xi). Indeed, the originality of Saki’s vision is one of several critical commonplaces found in the articles and full-length studies which have appeared since his death in 1916. Others are the misogyny of his writing (A. Waugh, vii, ix-x; Carey, viii); his role as a gay writer (Langguth, 30-1, 116-7, 187-8; A. Waugh, ix; Lauritsen, 850-1; Carey, xii-xiii; Seymour-Smith and Kimmens, 2279-80; Self, xv-xvi); the obsessive degree to which he inserts animals into his work (Knox, 12-14; Lambert, 56; Pritchett 1965, 98-9; Hanson, 44; Salemi, 423-30; Carey, vii); and his insistent use of

practical jokes (Greene, 101; Grigson, 316; Sharpe, 7; Langguth, 28-30; Fogle, 89-93; Hanson, 47-8; Carey, xi).

- 3 Commentators from Graham Greene to Will Self have remarked upon the primacy of children in Saki's work, while the biographies written about him argue that his own unhappy childhood was a creative wellspring for his fiction (Reynolds, xi-xii; E.M. Munro, 3-22; Gillen, 17-19; Langguth, 7-27). Indeed, Greene sees Saki's vivid, semi-autobiographical depictions of children's suffering as one of the great strengths of his writing (101). J.W. Lambert notes that "a sense of claustrophobia, private lives, and war against adults sounds through so many accounts of late Victorian childhood" (13), and the privileging of children within the dialectic of Victorian and Edwardian society is widely reflected in literary works by Carroll, Lear, Stevenson, Barrie, and Grahame (Wullschläger, 7). Thus the children in Saki's stories share common ground with other figures in late-19th- and early-20th-century fiction, such as the unloved, invalid characters of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), and his lack of didacticism on the subject of children continues the tradition of Carroll and Lear.
- 4 Although Lambert draws attention to the "essentially solitary" nature of Saki's child characters (60) and Self observes the "cynicism" (xvi) of his attitude to children, very little direct attention has been paid in Saki scholarship to the specific ways in which he particularises childhood, and to his complex, paradoxical position on the subject. Moreover, while his "cruelty" has often been noted, it has only rarely been discussed in the context of his child characters, and then only briefly (Carey,xxii; Self, xvi). In this article, I will explore these neglected aspects of Saki's writing by examining his portrayal of the adult treatment of children, before turning to the relationship between animals and children in his work; to the child's secret world or private psychic sphere; and to Saki's literary technique and the ways in which it supports his depictions of childhood. In my conclusion, I will explore whether in these stories children – in part instruments of Saki's satire, in part victims of life's cruelties – ultimately do "discourage our better instincts" (H.H. Munro, 19).

How adults treat children

- 5 Saki was brought up by two maiden aunts, Charlotte and Augusta, in Devon in the 1870s; and Augusta was described by his sister, Ethel, as "a woman of ungovernable temper ... imperious, a moral coward, possessing no brains worth speaking of" (7). Art is made to imitate life through the consistently bad treatment children receive from their parents or guardians in these stories. Sometimes this takes the form of active oppression and deliberate attempts at corruption; at other times, children are simply subjected to disparaging remarks or neglect. It is worth drawing a distinction, however, between two genres of story about children in Saki's writing: those which feature small children in cameo roles, often to apparently comic effect; and those in which older children are the protagonists, their perspective favoured above all else. There is a world of difference between other people's children, who are as uninteresting as "other people's dreams" (308), and the state of childhood as personally experienced in all its bitterness.
- 6 Children in incidental roles merit little more than a contemptuous passing mention at best, and a bloody fate at worst. Often they are blithely and humorously sacrificed in Nature's survival of the fittest. In "The Story-Teller" (*Beasts*), Bertha – a cartoon-like character created by the unnamed "bachelor" in his story-within-the-story – is

exemplary of this trend. The third-person narrator of the story overall comments explicitly upon the arresting oxymoron of her "horribly good" behaviour (250): "the word horrible in connection with goodness was a novelty that ...seemed to introduce a ring of truth ...absent from the aunt's tales of infant life" (250).⁴ By exposing Bertha's "goodness" as priggish and hypocritical, Saki departs radically from the Romantic and Victorian figure of the child as a site of sanctity and innocence. But if Bertha is smug and self-serving, the taste for cruelty of the children listening ensures that they do not have the moral high ground. Although this clear-eyed thesis of childhood is more akin to pre-19th-century traditions of the inherently "evil child" (Briggs, 169; James, Jenks, and Prout, 10-13; Heywood, 22, 27), Saki derives subversive strength from his decision not to moralise through such portrayals.

- 7 The sound of Bertha's "medals" (awarded for piety) "clinking" (251) betrays her hiding place to the hungry wolf, who stalks familiarly fairy-tale territory by "prowling the park to see if it could catch a fat little pig for its supper" (251). In an inversion of "The Three Little Pigs", however, it is Bertha who is instead "devoured ...to the last morsel" (251). A well-behaved child is viciously killed, yet this plot twist is made to seem acceptable because it occurs within the safe parameters of a consciously fictional, pseudo-nursery story narrative. Furthermore, Bertha's sanctimoniousness is deemed to be more culpable than the psychologically violent impulses of the bachelor's young audience, who wholeheartedly endorse a story in which predatory animals triumph over humans, and light (in the form of a pious little girl) is conquered by darkness (the "big, bad wolf" of "Little Red Riding Hood" tradition).
- 8 "The Schartz-Metterklume Method" (*Beasts*) is concerned with the issue of children's education, but – as with the bachelor's telling of mock-fairy stories – the conventional is again satirised. With a suspension of moral etiquette and Pied Piper mystique similar to those of the bachelor, Lady Carlotta encourages the children in her charge to understand history by re-enacting the violent episode of the Romans'rape of the Sabine women. An earlier story, "Reginald's Choir Treat" (*R.*), engages further with the notion of adult pleasure derived from unleashing anarchy among children. Given the opportunity to "supervise the annual outing of the bucolic infants [in] the local choir" (13), Reginald persuades them to go for a swim and then return to the village stark naked. On one level, the detached, sardonic tenor of "bucolic infants" frees Reginald – and the story's narrator – from responsibility for any damage done to the children. Viewed from another angle, however, this episode contains the unmistakably "homosexual nuances" that John Carey has identified in many of Saki's Reginald stories (xii). Carey is right to foreground the subtle, but persistent, sexuality at work in these stories, but I would go further and argue that "Reginald's Choir Treat" contains more alarming undercurrents: wilful unkindness to children at best and paedophilia at worst.
- 9 Saki is fully alert to the presence of adult hypocrisy towards children in his early stories. In "The Innocence of Reginald" (*R.*), Reginald argues that "people talk vaguely about the innocence of a little child, but they take mighty good care not to let it out of their sight for twenty minutes" (28). But Saki's own linguistic strategies often relegate children to a lowly status: detachment is implied by "bucolic infants", and even when Reginald appears to defend persecuted children in "The Innocence of Reginald", he still refers to the generic child of his observation as "it". Similarly, and in more sinister fashion, the "Toop child" in "Gabriel-Ernest" (*R. in R.*) never rises above the status of "it", underscoring the character's role as inferior animal prey at the hands of the boy-cum-werewolf, Gabriel-

Ernest. The Toop child's lack of gender or indeed of any individual identity (other than family name) ensures that there is little sense of the tragedy of his/her death.

- 10 The linguistic techniques of Clovis, a recurrent character in Saki's fiction, display a similarly off-hand cruelty. He asks Mrs. Momeby in "The Quest" (*Chronicles*) of her lost son, Erik: " 'do you mean it's dead, or stampeded, or that you staked it at cards and lost it that way?' " (107) [emphasis added]. Throughout the story, Saki consistently applies a language of cool disengagement to the little boy: he is the Momebys'"restored offspring" (109), a "struggling infant" (109), and "the squalling baby" (109). These stories, in which a child can be both tragic victim and fair game, establish a pattern in Saki's work of love and hatred for children; the love side of this dichotomy is, as we will see, manifested in later works which focus entirely on a single child. Like his "half out, half in" approach to high society (Birden, n.p.), his contradictory attitude to children implies both that parents and their children are fertile, appropriate material for satire, and that childhood is of compulsive interest to Saki. Indeed, it is a trope he can never quite discard.

Saki's hierarchy of children and animals

- 11 Within Saki's discourse of childhood, animals – generally presented as innately superior to humans – take precedence over children. The anthropomorphised Gabriel-Ernest is, for instance, described in inverse proportion to the dehumanisation of the Toop child. He is "a boy of about sixteen" (47) with specific dietary habits (48) and a languid physical presence, detailed in vaguely homoerotic terms (47). By describing the boy at length and then allowing him to triumph, Saki forces the reader to question the glibly-accepted hierarchy which places people above animals (Knox, 14; Lambert, 56; Spears, 42; Gillen, 80-1; Sharpe, 8). Although initially presented as a boy himself, Gabriel-Ernest echoes Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) in his casual references to child-eating, and while his higher status as an animal is assumed throughout the story, he is also a prime example of how Saki combines the apparently disparate elements of the human and the animal. Even though he more often places them in opposition to each other, Saki suggests, through Gabriel-Ernest, that humans and animals have more in common than might initially meet the eye.⁵ The character represents a malevolent version of the half-human, half-animal beings of classical mythology – satyrs and centaurs – his animal spirit lurking dangerously inside an ostensibly human body. In an analogous way, a human voice is unlocked from within the eponymous cat, Tobermory (*Chronicles*). Later manifestations of this theme are the semi-deified, titular ferret in "Sredni Vashtar" (*Chronicles*), who appears to understand human desires; and Esmé the hyena ("Esmé", *Chronicles*). Each creature has a human or semi-human name; each story is named after its animal protagonist – and each story takes the creature's side.
- 12 Children are a key element of these imaginative constructs. In "Esmé", the hyena carries off and kills a child as disposable as Gabriel-Ernest's victim. In this case, however, the brutality of this act is explicitly acknowledged, although the child is not only reduced to the customarily ambiguous "it": it has no name at all and is described as "a small half-naked gipsy brat" (76).⁶ The Baroness conversely personalises the animal as "he". She insists she must "hurry over" the death of the child victim "because it is really rather horrible" (76), and she interprets his/her death rattle as "crying from sheer temper [which] children sometimes do" (77). The child's "gipsy" background resurfaces when she argues that " 'I don't suppose in large encampments they really know to a child or two

how many they've got" (77). Similarly, in "Gabriel-Ernest", Mrs. Toop is said to be "decently resigned to her bereavement" because she has "eleven other children" (51).⁷

- 13 Animals are again implied to have the upper hand over children when Clovis suggests to his hostess in "The Quest" that "perhaps an eagle or a wild beast has carried" off her child; she responds that "there aren't eagles and wild beasts in Surrey'...but a note of horror had crept into her voice" (107). In Saki's world of genteel horror, no English county (not even Surrey) is immune from dangerous predators such as eagles, ferrets, hyenas, and other feral creatures like the lycanthropic Gabriel-Ernest.⁸ Sometimes his fascination with this device creates an inter-referential quality in the stories concerned. The reader's recent memory of "Esmé", for example, lends a chilling frisson of dramatic irony to Clovis's later remark: "what a sensational headline it would make ...'Infant son of prominent Nonconformist devoured by spotted hyæna'..." (107).
- 14 For Joseph S. Salemi, these unconventional juxtapositions of humans and exotic creatures are jarring, but can be explained by "the actual proximity and familiarity with live animals that obtained in the Western world ...ninety years ago" (424). He still ponders, though, "why Saki makes such excessive literary use" of these wild animals (424). The death of Saki's mother was linked to an attack by a runaway cow and his childhood drawings, which routinely show humans being gored, and sometimes eaten, by buffalo, lions and bears (E.M. Munro, 16, 21, 23), suggest that this idea was a lifelong obsession. Children are the victims of animals not simply in his fiction but also in his letters, where he is capable of making real-life children the subject of such fantasies, suggesting to his sister that a wolf might be tempted to eat "the small Vernon boys" (E.M. Munro, 46, 71). In this respect, Saki's world arguably parallels that of Hilaire Belloc, whose *Cautionary Verses* (1908) features animals attacking and eating naughty children.⁹ For Self, however, it is Saki's homosexuality which is the key motivation here. He asks whether, behind the "savagely unsentimental" treatment children receive in "Esmé" and "The Quest", "there [is] not perhaps the authentically misanthropic voice of the man who knows paternity will never be for him?" (xvi). Saki's persistent dehumanisation of other people's children certainly lends support to such accusations, but beyond this lies another response to childhood: his sensitive awareness of vulnerable, intelligent, older children who suffer adult bullying. This is the theme of stories which move from blackly humorous acts of cruelty inflicted on "other people's children" to dense re-workings of his own personal history. In such stories, animals still occupy a higher place than people, but are shown to have much in common with children: both are subjugated and imprisoned by adults, but are capable of emancipating themselves, sometimes violently. Animals move, moreover, from being the assailants of children to their closest allies, and are thus central to children's shift from victim status to an early form of selfhood.

Animals as allies for children

- 15 As a defence against their treatment by adults, Saki's child protagonists often have a taste for dark ideas and, as I have argued, these impulses tend to be expressed through events involving the animals they own and to whom they have turned for comfort in a bleak world. "The Penance" (*Toys*) describes three children mourning the loss of their cat, killed by an adult neighbour, Octavian, after it attacked his chickens. The children are too intelligent and angry to be bribed by Octavian's "blood-money" of chocolates and "crystallized violets" (302) and instead take revenge by holding his two-year-old daughter

hostage. In this story, as in “Sredni Vashtar” and “The Boar-Pig” (*Beasts*), Saki demonstrates a situation of kinship and collusion between animals and children – a far cry from the more simplistic comic strategy of pitting vicious animals against helpless children. Here the children have identified with the vulnerability of animals, a quality which sits paradoxically with their lethal potential, and they have decided that members of the animal kingdom vastly outstrip people in importance. Saki reveals a barbaric version of children’s code, in which another child can be taken prisoner as retaliation for the killing of a prized animal.

Sredni Vashtar went forth
 His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white.
 His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death.
 Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful (101).

- 16 This obsessive, quasi-religious call to arms, which recalls the language of political manifestos, elevates the “lithe, sharp-fanged beast” (100) to an object of pagan reverence for Conradin, who worships him “with mystic and elaborate ceremonial ...Red flowers ... and scarlet berries ...were offered at his shrine, for he was a god” (100).¹⁰ The ferret is a child-sized object and agent of destruction, and childish justice is eventually achieved when the ferret’s vicious attack on Mrs. De Ropp liberates Conradin from her. This moment, which has often been interpreted as one of fictional vengeance on the self-appointed despots of Saki’s childhood, concludes a story whose complete investment in its child protagonist’s point of view convinces the reader, at a visceral level, that bloody death is a justified punishment for the sustained cruelty of adult guardians. It also makes clear that such a death can be achieved only through the help of animals.¹¹

The child’s secret world

- 17 “Sredni Vashtar” is Saki’s representation *par excellence* of the desperation of a child’s private universe. Conradin could not be further from the world of “bucolic infants”, “missing offspring”, and subhuman “it” creatures, while Saki suggests that, through imagination, children can transcend their loneliness. The childish perspective privileged here is similarly intense in “The Lumber-Room” (*Beasts*), where the narrative is revealed exclusively through the eyes of Nicholas, although, as with all of these stories, it is told in the third person. He has discovered that “by standing on a chair in the library one could reach a shelf on which reposed a fat, important-looking key” which will unlock “the mysteries of the lumber-room” (265). The room becomes an exclusive paradise from which other children are excluded: Nicholas’brother and cousins have been taken to the beach without him and, since access to the lumber-room is usually reserved “for aunts and such-like privileged persons” (265), now is his opportunity to enter this forbidden territory. As Bruno Bettelheim writes of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, “what child is not curious about what adults do behind the closed door and would not wish to find out?” (219).
- 18 Once inside, the room becomes a whole world for Nicholas, whose imagination is unlocked by a metaphorical key. Indeed, the room becomes as much a psychological space as a physical one.¹² The grey, unappealing, often painful terrain of guardians – the word “aunt” has become a synecdoche for such people – can be eagerly, if only temporarily, abandoned. The unreal and inanimate achieve a magical half-life through the passion felt by Nicholas as he tries to believe in them, while the “life-history” he attributes to the

"mandarin duck" (266) inside a colour book about birds recalls Conradin's invention of the special polecat-ferret cult in "Sredni Vashtar". In that case, the ferret's imagined history afforded him the supernatural power of a voodoo fetish. The conclusion to "The Lumber-Room" is gentler, but its message is similar to that of "Sredni Vashtar": namely, that in spite of constant punishment and privation, a child can retain mental independence, albeit fleetingly, through stolen moments of private fantasy, physically embodied either by a cherished animal or the four walls of a secret room or shed.

- 19 Saki's only working-class children, Emmeline and Bert in "Morlvera" (*Toys*), share the same need to escape and fantasise as his other child characters. Resident in an urban (rather than rural) setting, with London locations acting as a social litmus test, St. James's Park is their version of the lumber-room. The toy of the story – a doll christened Morlvera by Emmeline and bought for the privileged Victor to give to his cousin – briefly unites the interests of these socially polarised children: Emmeline and Bert instinctively relate to Victor as he clutches the very doll on which they have been projecting a past and a future. Furthermore, the imaginary identity Emmeline delights in attaching to Morlvera resembles the anthropomorphising of animals in other stories. The doll, like the key used to unlock the lumber-room, opens a door into a new corner of the "backstreet" children's powerfully interior world.

Saki's literary technique

- 20 Saki exploits to the full the unsettling contrast between an economical and unobtrusive literary style and the frequently outrageous content of his stories,¹³ especially those about children. One favoured narrative strategy is to re-work and disorder fairy tales, as we have seen in "Gabriel-Ernest" and "The Story-Teller". On one level, these texts simply recognise the horror element of traditional children's literature: stories which are populated by foxes, bears, and wolves, sometimes in disguise; witches and wicked stepmothers (changed here to aunts), who meet a predictably sticky end. But on another level, Saki's short fiction suggests that predatory animals actually *do* eat children: a startling departure from the safety of "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", where we know that the child will at least survive.¹⁴ Another recurring device of these texts is their energetic use of names. "Gabriel" suggests angelic qualities, while "Ernest" evokes high-mindedness: both ideas are ironically disproved by events. "Sredni Vashtar" and "Conradin", which most likely derive (along with the emphatic red of the polecat-ferret cult) from Saki's experiences as a journalist in Russia, are among many examples of his stylised nomenclature which, like Dickens' naming techniques, carries its own freight of meaning.¹⁵
- 21 In all his stories, Saki consistently manages to suspend the reader's moral judgement through sparkling satire and the shock ending. He also keeps up the flow of dialogue and description, as for instance in his casual personification of animals and dehumanisation of people. As A.J. Langguth puts it of "Tobermory", Saki presents "the supernatural ...with so little flourish that the story is done before logic has recovered itself enough to protest" (173). Paul Larreya, meanwhile, has identified the ways in which Saki's style invites the reader's complicity through linguistic implication (98-9, 106) and we have seen how disposable a child can become in a story through his technical sleights-of-hand. At the same time as sweeping the reader along on his wave of stylish amorality, Saki also corrupts religious language, possibly because he views it as another part of the apparatus

of authority.¹⁶ This tendency can again be applied to children specifically, as in "Reginald on House Parties" (R.) when Reginald sympathises with Herod and child massacre is made to seem comically acceptable.

- 22 Saki's use of a double narrative technique in stories such as "Esmé" and "The Story-Teller" maintains authorial distance, rather as adults detach themselves from unpleasant killings: for example, the hyena's slaughter of the "gipsy" child and the planned extermination of animals in "Louis" (*Toys*). The bloody deed is always defined otherwise: Strudwarden in "Louis" will "arrange a fatality" for his wife's dog (297), while in "Sredni Vashtar", the polecat ferret's special status co-exists with the sordid reality of "dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat" (102): the mark of a very different kind of "red" from that used to symbolise the Sredni Vashtar cult. This detail serves as brutal and shocking evidence for an event which, like the killings carried out by Esmé and Gabriel-Ernest, has effectively occurred off-stage. Through his tropes of inversion, Saki shocks his audience by challenging conventional social pieties in their relation to children: pragmatic hypocrisy, feigned concern, and smugly virtuous pronouncements.

Conclusion

- 23 This article has attempted to explore Saki's paradoxical representation of children, who are privileged above older people one minute and subjected to mocking contempt the next. Child characters afford Saki a particularly fruitful vein of satire, his favoured mode, and – through their inherently subversive, irresponsible attitudes and their insouciant ability to exact vengeance where necessary – they allow him to cast a cold light on the shallow, moneyed society around him and to expose its endemic hypocrisy. In so doing, he compels his audience to re-consider how adults deal with children and to re-examine the unthinking social hierarchies which presuppose the superiority of adults over children, and people over animals. Although he is comically clear-sighted about children's foibles – such as gluttony, naked aggression and a puerile obsession with war¹⁷ – such insights generally sustain his ironic inversions of children and adults.
- 24 Like animals, children have understood certain ideas with an apparently cynical clarity often lacking in their elders.¹⁸ They are, furthermore, possibly the most important linchpin of Saki's writing, because it is through these characters and the stories devoted to them that he can move beyond clever and surprising comic set-pieces to create his most psychologically convincing situations. Drawing in part on his own unhappy childhood, from which his fiction suggests he could never fully detach himself, Saki reveals not only the child's bitter world of alienation and oppression, but also the secret spheres – in all their mythic power – which children are so adept at fashioning for themselves in order to challenge their role as victims.
- 25 Why then does he perpetuate the very cruelty from which such children are seeking to escape? And whose side does he favour: the adults' or the children's? The sympathy shown to the likes of Nicholas and Conradin co-exists uneasily with the brutal dispatch of very young children in other narratives. The stories in which children appear often tread a precarious line between humour and other, darker forces: cruelty – it is unclear at which point a practical joke becomes an act of malice; and sexual perversion – when does the narrator's gaze on young male nakedness in, for instance, "Gabriel-Ernest" and "Reginald's Choir Treat" become paedophilic? At the same time, the tensions generated by such ambiguities also energise Saki's stories. One could argue that he identifies fully

with child survivors and the emotionally harrowing worlds they inhabit but not with the cosseted, spoilt infants he encountered socially; and he ensures that they experience a measure of the cruelty meted out to his siblings and himself. As Self has argued, the elusiveness of fatherhood may also inform Saki's crueller responses to children, but there is – above all – a strange justice in the love-hate treatment they receive. Children are no more exempt than anyone else from a harsh fate in these stories: in other words, precisely *because* they are important as people in their own right, they are not spared the random cruelties of life.

- 26 I would contend that in Saki's short fiction as a whole, children ultimately draw out, rather than discourage, the "better instincts" of adults. Stories in which they receive care and attention, whether from their parents and relatives or from a sensitive narrator, outnumber those in which they are sacrificed as part of a shocking *dénouement*. For an ostensibly amoral and cruel writer, there is unexpected compassion behind Saki's need to offer the chance of liberty to such figures as Conradin and Nicholas. Similarly, a heartfelt conviction that they deserve happiness informs his drive to lay bare the reality of their horribly claustrophobic childhoods. The voice which makes itself heard through their mouths, and through those of such precocious figures as Matilda and Vera ("The Lull" and "The Open Window", *Beasts*) is arguably Saki's most eloquent and deeply-felt. While we cannot ignore the disturbing flashes of savagery and even sexual perversion in his attitude to children, such characters add a crucial extra dimension to his writing, a dimension made all the more intriguing and complex by his harsh dismissals of children elsewhere. An interrogation of this contradictory treatment not only supports critical claims of Saki's unique place in English letters, but also enriches our understanding of his work.

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NOTES

1. I will use the following abbreviations to refer to the relevant volumes of Saki's short fiction: *R.* (*Reginald*, 1904); *R. in R.* (*Reginald in Russia*, 1910); *Chronicles* (*The Chronicles of Clovis*, 1911); *Beasts* (*Beasts and Super-Beasts*, 1914); and *Toys* (*The Toys of Peace*, 1919).
2. Saki wrote Kipling-inspired political satires, entitled the "Not So Stories", for the *Westminster Gazette* in 1902.
3. See "The Westminster Alice" (H.H. Munro, 575-94) in which Saki satirises British political life by using Carroll's "Alice" characters.
4. See Yvard (112).
5. Compare Salemi (425-6).
6. See Hanson (44).
7. Compare Carey (xxii).
8. Compare Self (xii).
9. For a discussion of Saki's "affinities" with Belloc, see Allen (85-8).
10. Compare Sharpe (8) for a discussion of Saki's "zootheism".
11. One can also read the fantastical wish-fulfilment in "Sredni Vashtar" in the light of Bettelheim (46), a discussion of children's "animistic" beliefs in relation to animals.
12. For the psychological associations of rooms in general, see Bachelard (18-20); in fairy tales, Bettelheim (298-303); and in literature more widely, Gilbert and Gubar (83-6, 340, 347, 348). Compare, too, Wullschläger (145) and *The Secret Garden*: the lumber-room anticipates the transformative possibilities of Hodgson Burnett's enchanted territory.

13. See Fogle (92).
 14. See Drew (97) and Yvard (111-2).
 15. See Gillen (74); and on Saki's use of names more generally, Milne (xi); Greene (101); Spears (24, 42); and Overmyer (173).
 16. Saki's aunts and grandmother tried to instil the fear of God into their charges (E.M. Munro, 6-7, 9, 13), while his early work, *The Rise of the Russian Empire* (1900), was noted by contemporary critics for its anti-Christian feeling; see Sharpe (12) and Seymour-Smith and Kimmens (2279). A. Waugh argues that Saki's "repressed homosexuality ...explains his rage with the Christian Church" (ix).
 17. See "The Strategist" (*R. in R.*) for gluttony; "Hyacinth" (*Toys*) and "The Boar-Pig" for naked aggression; and "The Forbidden Buzzards" (*Beasts*) and "The Toys of Peace" (*Toys*) for little boys' obsessive interest in war.
 18. Compare Drake (1960, 68) and Spears (74-5).
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ABSTRACTS

Les enfants jouent un rôle important dans les nouvelles de Saki (Hector Hugh Munro); cependant, bien qu'ils enrichissent son œuvre, l'auteur leur réserve un traitement paradoxal : s'ils sont souvent préférés aux adultes ils sont aussi souvent méprisés – Saki, dirait-on, s'en soucie peu. Cette attitude incite le lecteur à revoir les principes d'une hiérarchie sociale qui, de manière arbitraire, déclare la supériorité des adultes par rapport aux enfants. Il s'agit cependant d'une position foncièrement problématique. Parce que si Saki proteste contre la cruauté des adultes envers les enfants, il semble aussi l'applaudir.

La critique conventionnelle place traditionnellement Saki dans la lignée de Rudyard Kipling, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll et Oscar Wilde, quoique sa position dans le monde des lettres serait « unique ». Sa misogynie, son homosexualité, son obsession pour les animaux, son goût pour la farce et d'autres lieux communs concernant son écriture ont également été relevés. En revanche, il n'existe aucune étude spécifiquement consacrée à la façon dont Saki traite les enfants et l'enfance, alors que, selon ses biographes son enfance malheureuse constitue une source majeure d'inspiration pour ses nouvelles.

L'objectif du présent article est de répondre à ce manque. Pour ce faire, dans un premier temps la représentation des adultes par rapport aux enfants et la conduite des premiers envers ces derniers est étudiée dans nombre de ses nouvelles. Dans un deuxième temps la représentation de l'univers secret des enfants et la complicité entre ceux-ci et les animaux sont considérées. Après une étude des moyens littéraires qu'engagent ces représentations pour leur mise en oeuvre, l'article se penche enfin sur l'ambiguïté qui gouverne ces représentations. Ainsi se dégage l'hypothèse selon laquelle les enfants de Saki s'animent dans son œuvre pour que les meilleurs sentiments du lecteur se maintiennent somnolents.

AUTHORS

RUTH MAXEY

Ruth Maxey is a doctoral candidate at University College London, where she is completing a dissertation on issues of home, nationhood and identity formation in South Asian diaspora writing in Britain and the United States. She has published "The East is Where Things Begin: Writing the Ancestral Homeland in Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston (Orbis Litterarum 60.1 [February 2005]: 1-15).