Sredni Vashtar

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAKI

Hector Hugo Munro (best known by his pen name Saki) wrote witty and occasionally macabre stories that satirized the pretensions of Edwardian British society. Born in Burma (then a colony of the massive British Empire), Saki moved to England at age two after the death of his mother, where his strict grandmother and aunts raised him and his siblings. Saki's father remained in Burma as a member of the Imperial Police. In early adulthood Saki briefly returned to Burma to work a similar job, but after a series of illnesses, he returned to England. There, he started a new career as a journalist and eventually began writing the short stories for which he is best known. Having achieved success as a writer, at age 43 Saki volunteered to fight in World War I, even though he was well over the required age of enlistment. He was killed in action. Many biographers believe Saki was gay, although if so, he remained largely in the closet. Homosexuality was illegal in Britain at the time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Saki wrote many of his most famous stories, including "Sredni Vashtar," during the Edwardian period in England, when King Edward VII was on the throne (1901-1910). This period followed the Victorian era when Queen Victoria was on the throne (1837 to 1901), and like the Victorian era was often characterized as a time of prudish moral standards—homosexuality was outlawed and some editions of Shakespeare were censored to remove content deemed inappropriate for children. The Victorian era was also a time of social progress, however, and saw the abolition of the slave trade and the expansion of the right to vote. Throughout both the Victorian and Edwardian eras (as well as throughout Saki's writing career), Britain was a colonial power, with an Empire that covered so much of the globe that it was said that "the sun never set on the British Empire." Saki himself witnessed and participated in the Empire, having been born in Burma and served there for a while as part of the Imperial Police. "Sredni Vashtar" satirizes both the Imperial British and the colonized cultures.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Saki's irreverent short stories were undoubtedly influenced by Oscar Wilde, whose work also took aim at the hypocrisy of respectable British society. Like "Sredni Vashtar," many of Wilde's works also climax with scenes of shocking violence, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. Saki also would have been familiar with the work of Rudyard Kipling, who is controversial today because of the racist themes in works such as his famous poem "The White Man's Burden," but who at the time was widely considered the master of the British short story. Saki's work went on to influence a new generation of writers. P. G. Wodehouse (best known for satirizing the upper class with his Jeeves and Wooster novels) is one of Saki's most direct successors, but Saki's influence has been acknowledged by a wide range of writers, including A. A. Milne (creator of Winnie the Pooh), Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), and Noël Coward (a prolific playwright whose best-known works include *Blithe Spirit* and *Private Lives*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sredni Vashtar
- **When Written:** Early 20th century
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1912
- **Literary Period:** Edwardian
- **Genre:** Satire
- **Setting:** Britain in the early 20th century
- **Climax:** Mrs. De Ropp goes to investigate the shed where Conradin spends his time, and she is killed by the ferret Sredni Vashtar
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. De Ropp
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The Real Mrs. De Ropp. After the death of his mother, Saki was raised by his grandmother and aunts, who reportedly ran a very strict household. Many aspects of "Sredni Vashtar," particularly the villainous Mrs. De Ropp, may have been inspired by Saki's own childhood.

PLOT SUMMARY

Conradin is a ten-year-old boy living in early 20th-century England, who is supposedly so sickly that the doctor predicts he won't live another five years (although most people don't count the doctor's opinion for much, with the exception of Conradin's guardian Mrs. De Ropp). Mrs. De Ropp is Conradin's older cousin, and to him she represents everything in the world that is real and necessary but unpleasant. Ostensibly, Mrs. De Ropp is with Conradin in order to care for him, but she frequently forces him to do things he dislikes. While this is supposedly for his own good, she seems to enjoy denying Conradin what he wants, and as a result, Conradin is lonely and frequently uses

his active imagination in an attempt to escape his circumstances.

Conradin spends most of his time in a dull garden overlooked by windows of the house, where Mrs. De Ropp is always watching him, ready to open a window and yell if she catches him doing something he shouldn't. For Conradin, by far the most interesting part of the garden is an abandoned toolshed. Inside the toolshed, where Mrs. De Ropp can't see him, Conradin lets his active imagination run wild. He fills the toolshed with "phantoms," some based on history and others that he invents on his own.

There are also two living residents of the toolshed. One is a ragged looking **Houdan hen** (a French breed of chicken with some combination of black and white feathers), which Conradin takes a liking to. The other is a large polecat-ferret, which lives in a large hutch (or cage) and which a local butcher boy helped Conradin smuggle into the shed in exchange for some silver that Conradin had hoarded over time. Conradin is afraid of the sharp-fanged polecat-ferret, but it's also his most valued possession. He keeps it a secret from Mrs. De Ropp and gives it a name that one day miraculously came to him: Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret. Conradin invents a pagan-style religion to worship the ferret, with exotic rituals that contrast with the more mundane rituals Conradin observes every week when his cousin takes him to church.

Eventually, Mrs. De Ropp notices how much time Conradin is spending in the toolshed. She decides it can't be good for him, so one morning at breakfast she announces that the Houdan hen was sold and taken away overnight. She expects—perhaps even hopes—that this will make Conradin sad or angry, and she's already prepared her answers to his complaints. But Conradin just goes pale and says nothing. That afternoon, Mrs. De Ropp puts **toast** on the table (a delicacy she usually denies him on the grounds that it's bad for his health and too much trouble for her to make), but Conradin doesn't take any of it.

That evening Conradin prays to his ferret god, Sredni Vashtar, asking for a favor. He doesn't say aloud what he'd like; instead he asks Sredni Vashtar to "do one thing for me," since, in his imagination, Sredni Vashtar is a god and should know what that one thing is. Conradin repeats variations on this prayer throughout the next few days, both in the woodshed and at night in his dark bedroom. Mrs. De Ropp notices that his visits to the toolshed haven't stopped, so one day she goes in the shed to investigate.

Inside the shed, Mrs. De Ropp finds the hutch where Sredni Vashtar lives, but she doesn't see Sredni Vashtar and believes that the hutch may contain guinea pigs. She tells Conradin she is going to get rid of them and searches his room, finding a key to the hutch that he had hidden. She goes back to the shed, while Conradin stays inside the house and watches her through the window.

As Conradin watches from the window, he imagines his cousin in the shed, peering down into Sredni Vashtar's straw with her short-sighted eyes and being surprised by what she finds. He repeats his prayer for Sredni Vashtar, but he fears the worst—that Mrs. De Ropp will come out of the shed with a pinched smile on her face and that later the gardner will carry Sredni Vashtar away. But after several minutes, the door of the shed is still ajar. Conradin waits, beginning to feel triumphant as under his breath he repeats a battle chant he made up about Sredni Vashtar conquering his enemies.

Then, out of the shed comes Sredni Vashtar, with blood stains on his jaw and throat. The ferret walks down to a brook in the lower part of the garden, takes a drink, then disappears into some bushes. Just then a maid asks Conradin where his cousin is. He responds that his cousin went to the shed some time ago, so the maid goes to check.

Conradin begins to toast himself some bread, drawing the process out and using a lot of butter. There is chaos throughout the house as the servants discover Mrs. De Ropp's body in the shed and bring it into the house. While the voices of the servants argue what to do next, Conradin makes himself a second piece of toast.

CHARACTERS

Conradin – Conradin is a ten-year-old boy living in early 20th-century England, who is supposedly in poor health and unlikely to live more than five more years (although his doctor may not be reliable). Lonely, but with an active imagination, Conradin frequently finds himself stifled by his older cousin, Mrs. De Ropp, who claims to be looking out for Conradin's best interests, but who seems to take particular pleasure in denying Conradin the things that he enjoys. To take refuge from the watchful eye of Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin begins spending time in an abandoned toolshed on his cousin's property. The shed becomes a playground for his imagination, but it's also the home of two real creatures: the **Houdan hen** and a polecat-ferret that Conradin paid a local boy to smuggle in. Conradin names the polecat-ferret Sredni Vashtar and that he eventually begins to worship as a pagan god. Mrs. De Ropp notices that Conradin is spending a lot of time in the shed and, as usual, decides to thwart him. She succeeds in selling off the Houdan hen, but even after it's gone, Conradin continues to spend time in the shed. He prays to Sredni Vashtar to "do one thing for me," without specifying what exactly the one thing is. At the climax of the story, Conradin watches Mrs. De Ropp go into the shed, expecting her to find and exterminate Sredni Vashtar but hoping for the opposite and whispering a battle chant that he had created for the ferret. As it happens, Sredni Vashtar survives and escapes, apparently killing Mrs. De Ropp. Conradin doesn't seem concerned—in fact, his prayers have been answered. At the end of the story, he prepares himself a

piece of **toast** while the servants shout in dismay and argue about what to do next.

Mrs. De Ropp – Mrs. De Ropp is Conradin's cousin and the epitome of early twentieth-century British respectability. She is the guardian for the sickly boy, and while she is ostensibly watching out for his health, her concern frequently becomes overbearing or even sadistic. Although she is short-sighted, she is always watching, and she forces Conradin to spend most of his time in a dull garden where there is little to do and where she can see him through a window (which she can open to yell at him if he does something wrong). Eventually, Conradin discovers that he can escape Mrs. De Ropp's watchful eye by spending time in an abandoned toolshed. Mrs. De Ropp decides that for some reason this must not be good for Conradin, so she searches the toolshed herself and discovers the **Houdan hen**, which she promptly sells, only telling Conradin about it the next morning. She is surprised when Conradin doesn't react to the selling of the hen and even offers him **toast** that afternoon, perhaps out of remorse (since usually she doesn't allow him to have toast with tea). Still, if Mrs. De Ropp does regret her actions, it's short-lived, because she soon notices that Conradin is continuing to spend time in the shed, so she makes plans once again to stop him. Ultimately, this leads to her discovering the cage of Sredni Vashtar. It's ambiguous what happens to Mrs. De Ropp once she enters the toolshed, but Conradin imagines that because she is short-sighted, she probably got up close to the straw where Sredni Vashtar was hiding, giving the ferret an opportunity to strike. What is clear is that Sredni Vashtar escapes alive, while Mrs. De Ropp's body is discovered by one of her servants. The servants debate about how to break the news to Conradin, but judging by his reaction (calmly toasting some bread), it doesn't seem that he's too concerned.

Sredni Vashtar – Sredni Vashtar is a polecat-ferret that a local butcher boy smuggled into Mrs. De Ropp's shed in exchange for some silver from Conradin. While Sredni Vashtar is a real ferret, in Conradin's imagination he's also a pagan god, who inspires elaborate rituals of devotion, including special festivals and chants. Sredni Vashtar has sharp, dangerous teeth, and as a result must be kept locked up in a hutch (a kind of cage). The wild Sredni Vashtar represents the exact opposite of the prim, traditionally religious Mrs. De Ropp. Several times in the story, Conradin prays for Sredni Vashtar to "do one thing for me," presumably to thwart his oppressive cousin. Ultimately, Sredni Vashtar kills the short-sighted Mrs. Ropp, blurring the line between imagination and reality by seemingly answering Conradin's prayers. It's possible to argue that, just as Mrs. De Ropp seems to stand-in for respectable British Imperial society, Sredni Vashtar functions as a kind of stand-in for the people, cultures, and religions colonized by the Empire. By today's standards, such a characterization would be considered racist in a variety of ways—a wild, dark-skinned animal serving as a symbol for not just one colonized people but for *all* colonized people. Within the story, the implication of Sredni Vashtar killing the proper but cruel and overbearing Mrs. De Ropp can be taken as signaling a pessimistic belief on the part of Saki that British Imperial rule as practiced was likely to foster revolt that would be the Empire's demise.

Maid – As a relatively wealthy woman in early twentieth-century England, Mrs. De Ropp has several servants, including a maid, who informs Conradin that tea is ready just before she goes out to the shed and discovers the body of Mrs. De Ropp. None of these servants play a large individual role in the story, but their presence helps to signify that Mrs. De Ropp is a member of the upper class, and their terror at the death of Mrs. De Ropp serves to amplify Conradin's own lack of concern.

Doctor – The doctor is a minor character who pronounces that Conradin won't live another five years, but because he is presented as "silky and effete," his opinion should be taken with a grain of salt. Like Mrs. De Ropp (who trusts him), the doctor is a member of the respectable upper class, but he doesn't seem to have done anything particularly impressive with his life. His main function in the story is to help Mrs. De Ropp justify the paternalistic, overbearing way she treats Conradin.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IMAGINATION VS. REALITY

At the heart of Saki's "Sredni Vashtar" is a lonely young boy named Conradin, who escapes from a real world that he hates by imagining that the polecat-ferret that he keeps in a cage in an abandoned toolshed is actually a pagan god named Sredni Vashtar. This violent, impatient god that Conradin invents is the polar opposite of Conradin's older cousin and guardian, Mrs. De Ropp, who is very religious in a more traditional Christian way and who constantly watches over Conradin and prevents him from doing things he enjoys. At first, it seems that Conradin's elaborate mythology of Sredni Vashtar is nothing more than the imaginings of a lonely child trying to escape a harsh reality. But when Mrs. De Ropp discovers the ferret and vows to get rid of it, Conradin begins praying to Sredni Vashtar to "do something" to change his circumstances, and the line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred: Sredni Vashtar ends up killing Mrs. De Ropp. Ultimately, Saki leaves it ambiguous as to whether the ending of "Sredni Vashtar" is really a moment of divine intervention inspired by Conradin's imagination-fueled faith or if it's just a morbid coincidence. In this way, the ending of the

story makes clear that "respectable" people like Mrs. De Ropp can't conceive of all that's possible in the world, and, further, that sometimes it isn't even possible to tell the difference between the imagined and the real.

While Conradin's escapist fantasies are his own invention, they are a reaction to his experience of real-world events. In particular, Conradin's fantasies arise from his resentment toward his respectable cousin Mrs. De Ropp. The cult of Sredni Vashtar (Conradin's invented pagan religion) is described as a religion that "[lays] special stress on the fierce impatient side of things, as opposed to the Woman's religion [i.e., Mrs. De Ropp's Protestant Christianity], which, as far as Conradin could observe, went to great lengths in the contrary direction." Saki's phrasing is humorous, since it is clearly Conradin who is setting his religion in opposition to Mrs. De Ropp's and not the other way around. Moreover, the irregularly scheduled festivals of the cult of Sredni Vashtar also seem to be directly connected to events in the real world. The longest festival lasted the three-day period during which Mrs. De Ropp was suffering from a toothache. At this point in the story, there is clearly a cause-and-effect link between the real world and Conradin's fantasies, but the influence goes one way, with real-world events dictating what happens in Conradin's fantasies.

Though Conrad's invented religion gives him joy and a sense of freedom, initially even he doesn't actually believe in it. When Conradin begins to actually pray to Sredni Vashtar to "do one thing for me," however, the line between an imaginary religion and an actual religion begins to blur a bit. When Conradin prays "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar," he does not specify what the thing is, trusting his great ferret god to be able to figure it out. By doing so, he suggests that Sredni Vashtar is omniscient, a truly godlike trait. This increasing trust in Sredni Vashtar's power doesn't seem to represent real religious devotion from Conradin (given his skepticism later that his prayers will actually be answered), but it does suggest a deeper commitment to the elaborate fantasy he's created. Conradin's devotion intensifies when Mrs. De Ropp finds the key to Sredni Vashtar's hutch in Conradin's room and goes to get rid of the animal (which at that moment she thinks is a guinea pig). Conradin in that moment even begins to chant a battle hymn describing Sredni Vashtar conquering his enemies. Yet even as Conradin desperately chants, the narrator notes that Conradin doesn't believe his own prayers. Conradin's religion still doesn't exist anywhere other than in his imagination. Even so, his invented religion takes up an increasingly large part of his thoughts and provides him solace in a miserable moment, suggesting that the made-up religion is gaining power, even if this power is still limited to what goes on in Conradin's head.

However, when at the climax of the story Mrs. De Ropp is killed by the Sredni Vashtar, it seems so much like an answer to Conradin's desperate prayers that it calls into question the divide between an imaginary religion and a real one. Saki deliberately withholds information so that it's impossible to tell exactly what happens at the end of the story. While Conradin is able to imagine a likely scenario (that the short-sighted Mrs. De Ropp leaned in too close to the straw where Sredni Vashtar was hiding), there is no way of knowing if this is actually what happened. The narrator's perspective mirrors Conradin's, watching the action from a distance far outside the dark shed. What is not in doubt, though, is the fact that Mrs. De Ropp has been killed by Sredni Vashtar. The shouting of the maid and the confusion of the other servants all attest to the fact that Conradin has not simply imagined the death of his guardian. But how the death occurred—whether it was just an unlikely everyday accident or whether Sredni Vashtar truly did gain some sort of power from Conradin's worship—is left in the dark of that shed.

The story's ambiguous ending makes it impossible to tell exactly where the line between imagination and reality ends. Ultimately, Conradin's imagination triumphs over Mrs. De Ropp's petty practicality, and as a result, the climax of the story has a tinge of fantasy, like a darkly comic fairy tale, even though there is no explicit evidence of any supernatural events. To try to figure out whether Conradin's prayers were really answered by Sredni Vashtar would be futile and perhaps missing the point—only in the dull mind of someone like Mrs. De Ropp are fantasy and reality so easily distinguishable.

RELIGION

There are two opposing forces in Saki's "Sredni Vashtar": the traditional, "respectable" Christian religion embodied by the prim and controlling Mrs. De Ropp and the wild, "pagan" religion embodied by the ferret-polecat Sredni Vashtar (who, in the lonely imagination of Mrs. De Ropp's young cousin and ward, Conradin, is a god). Like the Judeo-Christian God, Mrs. De Ropp is seemingly omnipotent, always able to see and judge what Conradin is doing in the garden through one of her many windows. Also like the Judeo-Christian God (at least in Saki's satirical take on British Christianity), she has strict rules and commandments about what Conradin can and can't do, often preventing him from doing things he enjoys—even things as simple as eating **toast** with his tea. By contrast, the religion that Conradin invents around Sredni Vashtar follows no strict schedule, provides no rules of conduct, and focuses on fantasies of violence—and gives Conradin a sense of freedom. While the story's portrayal of both Christian religion and of Conradin's "pagan" religion are not particularly nuanced and are largely satirical, the central thrust of Saki's satire is to use Conradin's cult of Sredni Vashtar as a foil to expose the stiff, cruel, and imagination-killing qualities that he saw in British organized religion.

Mrs. De Ropp's devotion to Christian religion is one of her central character traits, and it's no accident that Saki portrays her as repressive and controlling, and focused on arbitrary

ideas about what is "good" for Conradin that are less based on reason and more on denying him pleasure. One of Saki's most effective pieces of satire in the story is the scene where he reveals that Mrs. Ropp typically prevents Conradin from having toast because it's "bad" for him and too much of a hassle for her to make. Bread is a common religious symbol, evoking communion wafers, the unleavened bread that God commands the Israelites to eat in Exodus, and the parable of the loaves and fishes—in fact, it might be the most good-for-you food in all of Christianity. The fact that Mrs. De Ropp denies Conradin toast suggests not only that she is stingy and mean but that she is actually a hypocrite who can twist morality to be whatever she wants it to be. Perhaps the most villainous quality of Mrs. De Ropp is that she invades Conradin's shed, which is the one place where his imagination is free. This suggests intolerance on her part, because even though Conradin was not doing anything that affected her, she still felt the need to stop him. Because the story so closely associates Mrs. De Ropp with British Christianity, the story implies that British Christianity is also characterized by intolerance, hypocrisy, petty cruelty, and the need to stamp out all forms of imagination under the guise of doing what's "best" for others.

While Saki was perhaps most interested in satirizing the puritanical qualities of Protestant British Christianity, his story also satirizes so-called "pagan" religions. While the cult of Sredni Vashtar is portrayed as more vital and exciting than Mrs. De Ropp's Christianity (and arguably as even more powerful, given her demise at the end of the story), Saki portrays its rituals as largely arbitrary and guided by superstition. Even in Conradin's own fantasies, it isn't clear if sprinkling stolen nutmeg on festival days has any effect on what happens in the real world. Though Conradin designs his religion to be the exact opposite of Mrs. De Ropp's, at times Saki suggests that the two of them are actually quite similar. In particular, after the Houdan hen is sold, Conradin begins treating Sredni Vashtar more like a personal Protestant Christian God, saying nightly prayers, bestowing him with omnipotence, and even singing hymns.

Ultimately, while Saki satirizes both the Christianity of his fellow Britons as well as the "paganism" of religions that were more exotic to him, his story "Sredni Vashtar" does pick a clear winner between the two. When Mrs. De Ropp comes face-to-face with the great ferret Sredni Vashtar, her God is powerless to protect her from the fierce pagan deity. Perhaps Saki is satirizing the weakness of the Christian God more than he is extolling the virtues of foreign gods, but he does seem to find something vital and hopeful in the cult of Sredni Vashtar. Despite the gruesome violence, the story ends on an optimistic note, at least for Conradin, who is finally able to enjoy a pleasure that his cruel cousin had long denied him—toast. The ending may reflect Saki's own hope for a future Britain that has moved beyond the petty, hypocritical Christianity embodied by Mrs. De Ropp.

BRITISH COLONIALISM

Born to British parents in Burma (which was at the time a British colony) and working there as an adult for a few years in the Imperial Police, Saki saw firsthand what the outer reaches of the British Empire looked like, and he brought this awareness to "Sredni Vashtar." The title character of the story, Sredni Vashtar, is a ferret whom the story's main character, a lonely boy named Conradin, has come to imagine is a god. As a name, Sredni Vashtar invokes prominent gods of Hinduism, like Vishnu (the creator of the universe) and Shiva (the destroyer of the universe), and so the story links Conradin's made-up religion with those of the British colonies, such as India, that British considered "pagan." In addition, Conradin's cousin and guardian, Mrs. De Ropp, acts as a kind of "colonizer" in the story, ostensibly watching over Conradin and setting restrictions on his behavior for his own good, but secretly despising him and enjoying the power she wields over him. While Saki himself may certainly be accused of perpetuating stereotypes about colonized people (portraying the "brown" ferret god as savagely violent, for instance), in the story he masterfully portrays how Mrs. De Ropp's seemingly good intentions are actually based on cruelty, and he ties this cruelty to racist British ideas about what constitutes "respectable" behavior and how the British then use these ideas to justify their own continued rule over their colonies. The violent climax of the story—in which Mrs. De Ropp seeks to further control Conradin by getting rid of the ferret but is instead killed when she opens Sredni Vashtar's cage—can be read as indicating Saki's pessimism about the prospects of the British Empire, as it suggests that continued British rule is likely to result in eventual revolt and bloodshed. As it turned out this was true: Britain lost most of its empire within four decades after "Sredni Vashtar" was published in 1912.

While the story takes place entirely in one isolated estate in England, the actions of the respectable but loathsome Mrs. De Ropp parody the actions of the British Empire, both at home and abroad. Mrs. De Ropp is very strict about where Conradin can go and what he can do, limiting him to one barren garden where she can constantly watch him. This mirrors British colonial practices, where the colonizers tended to swoop in, extract valuable resources (leaving behind a metaphorical barren garden), then institute restrictive colonial governments that left locals with little say about what happened in their own lands. Perhaps Saki is even suggesting that the British try to "play God" in foreign countries, since restrictions that Mrs. De Ropp places on Conradin are a parody of the restrictions God placed on Adam in the Garden of Eden. Some of Mrs. De Ropp's actions are an even more direct parody of British history. When she kicks out the "Anabaptist" **Houdan hen**, for instance, she is unintentionally re-enacting a real moment in history when

Anabaptists were expelled from England.

The abandoned shed exists in a space that is both part of Mrs. De Ropp's garden and not, evoking the dual status of British colonies. Within the shed, Conradin is able to build a vibrant imaginative world, totally unlike the boring world of British respectability that his cousin represents. The wildness of this world—its only inhabitants are animals, one of which is extremely dangerous—evoke mainland British ideas about the colonies, some of which were famously popularized in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Mrs. De Ropp's strong, perhaps irrational desire to control what goes on inside the shed can also be read as a parody of British imperial ambitions. She wants to remove the wild animals from the shed, just like the colonizers who wanted to "civilize" the lands they conquered. In each case, doing "what was best" for the powerless involved the powerful oppressing them even more.

Ultimately, it is Mrs. De Ropp's insatiable desire for control that leads to her downfall, foreshadowing a similar fate for the respectable British Empire she represents. Saki makes it clear that, while Conradin celebrated Mrs. De Ropp's misfortunes with festivals to Sredni Vashtar, in reality, not even Conradin believed that he had any power to actually cause her harm. Mrs. De Ropp's interference in the shed, then, is totally unnecessary—it's an excuse to further show her power, when that power was already fully established. Such a show, then, does nothing except potentially overextend herself in a way that might—and does—make her vulnerable. Mrs. De Ropp easily gets rid of the Houdan hen, suggesting that she does indeed have power, even in Conradin's realm. But her success the first time leads her to become overconfident, and this causes her to mistake Sredni Vashtar for a bunch of guinea pigs, leaving her vulnerable to his fearsome fangs. Given how the shed has been characterized as a wild place and how the ferret is specifically described as "brown," it isn't a stretch to view Mrs. De Ropp's fate as Saki's own prediction for the fate of the British Empire abroad.

In the end, the dissolution of the British Empire was perhaps more violent than anything Saki could've predicted in 1912. While many former British colonies achieved independence through largely nonviolent means, this transition was made possible by the two World Wars, both of which resulted in tremendous destruction and which weakened Britain as an imperial power. As Saki predicted, the start of a new era was made possible through the violent death of the old one.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TOAST

Toast, in "Sredni Vashtar" represents all the little pleasures that Mrs. De Ropp denies her ward Conradin over the course of the story. Mrs. De Ropp often does not serve toast with tea because she deems it bad for Conradin and because it takes some effort for her to make, something that Saki writes was "a deadly offence in the middle class feminine eye." As a regular church-goer with a house full of servants, Mrs. De Ropp is the epitome of middle-class British respectability. The toast shows how petty and hypocritical middle-class Britons like Mrs. De Ropp can be and also how puritanical: it seems that the reason why she thinks toast is bad for Conradin is precisely because it gives him pleasure and because she has to do more than the bare minimum to make it. Notably, Conradin himself doesn't begin to eat toast until after Mrs. De Ropp is already dead, further cementing the idea that her very existence was an obstacle to Conradin's pleasure. When Conradin begins toasting bread at the end of the story, it shows that he isn't saddened at all by the death of Mrs. De Ropp, despite all the servants in the other room who are worried about how to break the news to him. In fact, Conradin even seems to be celebrating—he is quite literally "toasting" the death of his oppressive cousin.

HOUDAN HEN

Like the **toast**, the **Houdan hen** is another symbol in "Sredni Vashtar" of something pleasurable and lively that the soul-crushingly middle-class Mrs. De Ropp is intent on getting rid of. While the toast is a sensory pleasure, the Houdan hen represents the pleasures of the imagination and is the canvas onto which Conradin paints one of his most elaborate fantasies. While the Houdan hen doesn't become part of the cult of Sredni Vashtar (a pagan religion Conradin invents that stands in direct opposition to Mrs. De Ropp's stodgy church-going), Conradin makes it clear that the hen is not like Mrs. De Ropp. Conradin decides the hen is an Anabaptist, and while Conradin doesn't know what that means, he hopes it's not something respectable like his cousin. (Anabaptists are a Christian religious movement that broke away from the mainline Christian religions dominant in much of Europe at the time, so Conradin's choice, while humorously uniformed, is actually fairly accurate.) Ultimately, what pushes Conradin from privately detesting his cousin to actively praying for her downfall is the moment when Mrs. De Ropp secretly sells the Houdan hen and informs him about it the next day. Mrs. De Ropp tries to extinguish what the Houdan hen represents—the imagination and the rebelliousness—and while she's successful at first, her death at the hands of Sredni Vashtar suggests that her attempts to repress Conradin's imagination have literally come back to bite her.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves: Volume 1* published in 2018.

Sredni Vashtar Quotes

Conradin was ten years old, and the doctor had pronounced his professional opinion that the boy would not live another five years.

Related Characters: Doctor, Conradin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

This opening line of the story establishes Conradin as the central character. While the doctor is only a minor character, the fact that he's giving a "professional opinion" establishes one of recurring themes in the story: what it means to be respectable. While the doctor may seem like a respectable character at first and his diagnosis seems grave, subsequent parts of the story undermine this perspective, suggesting that maybe he is only considered good at his job by Mrs. De Ropp, who is herself portrayed as a hypocrite throughout the story.

Later in the story, Conradin will suspect that maybe the doctor and Mrs. Ropp are not only diagnosing an illness but actually making him sicker with all of their rules about what's good for him, causing Conradin to wither away to nothing. The fact that both the doctor and Mrs. De Ropp are opposed to Conradin illustrates that not only is he dominated by their authority but he is also outnumbered. Conradin is a boy with an active imagination—in the story he represents passion and creativity. By contrast, the doctor and Mrs. De Ropp represent oppressive dullness, despite all of their qualifications that make them respectable. The power of the doctor and Mrs. De Ropp in the story hints at Saki's pessimistic view of what constituted success in Britain at the time, although near the end of the story, Saki does leave some room for optimism, when Conradin is able to overcome them despite the odds.

Mrs De Ropp would never, in her honestest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him 'for his good' was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

While "Sredni Vashtar" is largely Conradin's story, parts of the narration do follow Mrs. De Ropp (particularly near the beginning of the story) and even sometimes reveal her thoughts. This quote reveals the layers of self-deception Mrs. De Ropp requires to go through her daily life. While the narration says that she can't admit to herself that she dislikes Conradin, it seems clear she does in fact dislike him, whether or not she's willing to admit it to herself. The conflict between Conradin and Mrs. De Ropp is central to the story, and Saki sets the stakes early, establishing that the dislike between them is mutual, if sometimes thinly concealed.

Saki uses negatives (i.e., "did not find particularly irksome") to humorously illustrate the mental gymnastics that Mrs. De Ropp goes through to justify her actions. The fact that Mrs. De Ropp enjoys thwarting Conradin but isn't willing to admit to disliking him suggests that her "honestest moments" are not actually all that honest and that her character is a total hypocrite. The phrase "dimly aware" suggests a sort of mental short-sightedness—a recurring theme with Mrs. De Ropp, who is also physically short-sighted. Mrs. De Ropp is not a pleasant character when she's introduced, and nothing that happens in the story will make her appear any more sympathetic or redeemable, so her humorously mean character introduction is appropriate.

Throughout the story Mrs. De Ropp is closely tied to both Christianity as it is practiced in Britain and to British Colonialist practices. As such, the story users her personal self-delusion about her reasons for the way she treats Conradin—telling herself it is for his own good when in fact it is because she dislikes him and enjoys thwarting and controlling him—to criticise British Christianity and colonialist for allowing similar self-delusions to justify a deeper cruelty and desire for power.

> And one day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the beast a wonderful name, and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion. The Woman indulged in religion once a week at a church near by and took Conradin with her, but to him the church service was an alien rite in the House of Rimmon. Every Thursday, in the dim and musty silence of the tool-shed, he worshipped with mystic and elaborate ceremonial before the wooden hutch where dwelt Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Sredni Vashtar, Conradin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

The scene where Sredni Vashtar receives his name is one of the most fanciful in the story, and it illustrates what Conradin can achieve with his imagination. Religion plays a central role in the story, and the opposition between Mrs. De Ropp's conservative British Christianity and what the story describes as Sredni Vashtar's wild paganism is one of the central conflicts in 'Sredni Vashtar."

One of the purposes of the cult of Sredni Vashtar in the story is to show how dull and repressive Mrs. De Ropp's religion is by comparison. While Sredni Vashtar encourages Conradin to use his imagination and his knowledge of history, Mrs. De Ropp seems entirely focused on preventing Conradin from doing things that might give him pleasure. Although Sredni Vashtar is dangerous and the elaborate rituals that Conradin concocts to celebrate him are strange, he is portrayed much more favorably in the story than Mrs. De Ropp because he brings Conradin joy.

On the other hand, some aspects of Sredni Vashtar's cult are actually meant to be similar to Mrs. De Ropp's Christianity (such as the weekly services and, later, the hymns that Conradin sings). In this case, the humor comes from the fact that a fantasy religion invented by a lonely ten-year-old boy bears similarities to a major organized religion that Mrs. De Ropp and many others have dedicated their lives to. Both the similarities and the differences play a key role in Saki's satire, allowing him to explore the role of religion in society from multiple angles, and, just as importantly to poke fun at what he saw as the self-seriousness, hypocrisy, and even cruelty of British Christianity.

> The Houdan hen was never drawn into the cult of Sredni Vashtar. Conradin had long ago settled that she was an Anabaptist. He did not pretend to have the remotest knowledge as to what an Anabaptist was, but he privately hoped that it was dashing and not very respectable. Mrs De Ropp was the ground plan on which he based and detested all respectability.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Sredni Vashtar, Conradin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

Like Sredni Vashtar, the Houdan hen is a key figure in Conradin's imagination. Conradin offers a lot of affection to the hen, perhaps because he has no humans in his life that he can be affectionate with and because Sredni Vashtar is so dangerous that to Conradin he becomes like a god instead of a friend or a pet.

The fact that Conradin decides the hen must be an Anabaptist is humorous, but also carries a deeper criticism of Mrs. De Ropp's worldview. The humor results from the fact that Conradin's choice to make this hen an Anabaptist shows his childhood ignorance, but also because in spite of this ignorance, it's actually a fairly accurate choice. As a traditional British Protestant, Mrs. De Ropp probably *wouldn't* find an Anabaptist respectable. That Conradin's fairly silly choice to make this chicken an Anabaptist to spite his cousin, and the fact that this silliness actually does mirror the reality of Mrs. De Ropp's feelings towards Anabaptist, hints at the underlying silliness of Mrs. De Ropp's assessment of what is and isn't respectable.

Typically, "respectability" might be considered a good thing, but the fact that it's associated in this moment with Mrs. De Ropp (who's already been established as an extremely unsympathetic character) indicates that in this story, it very much isn't. In fact, Saki's story explores the many ways that traditional ideas about "respectability" have been used to excuse actions that are cruel, oppressive, and even racist. Compared to the violent god Sredni Vashtar, the Houdan hen is a harmless companion for Conradin, one that just minds her own business, and this is why it's so cruel later when Mrs. De Ropp secretly sells the hen. With the hen, Saki demonstrates the heartless and arbitrary things that people like Mrs. De Ropp will do for the sake of "respectability."

Something perhaps in his white set face gave her a momentary qualm, for at tea that afternoon there was toast on the table, a delicacy which she usually banned on the ground that it was bad for him; also because the making of it 'gave trouble', a deadly offence in the middle-class feminine eye.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after selling the Houdan hen, Mrs. De Ropp offers Conradin toast, perhaps trying to console him in a rare moment where she listens to her conscience. The gesture is hollow, however, because the very fact that she usually denies Conradin toast in the first place is cruel, considering how much he enjoys it and how simple it is to make.

With this quote, Saki highlights Mrs. De Ropp's puritanical qualities: it seems that she decides toast is bad for Conradin precisely because it's a delicacy. Her whole purpose in life is to get enjoyment for herself out of denying others enjoyment. Equally significant is the excuse that toast "gave trouble." It demonstrates that Mrs. De Ropp isn't willing to make even the slightest effort for her cousin. (While toasters hadn't been invented yet at the time the story was written and set, making toast was still so easy that a ten-year-old could do it in no time, as demonstrated at the end of the story.)

The reference to Mrs. De Ropp's "middle-class feminine eye" is also significant, given that her eyes (and specifically her short-sightedness) are mentioned several times throughout the story. With this line, Saki draws a clear parallel between Mrs. De Ropp's weak physical eyes and the "eye" of her comfortably middle class viewpoint that is informed by a belief in the value of "respectable" British institutions such as Christianity and the Empire. As it turns out, Mrs. De Ropp's bad eyesight might be the literal cause of her death in the story (assuming that what Conradin imagines is correct: that her short-sightedness causes her to stick her nose into Sredni Vashtar's straw, leaving her vulnerable). Saki seems to be predicting a similarly bad fate for short-sighted middle- and upper-class Britons who value Christian respectability like Mrs. De Ropp, and he may specifically be making fun of the way Britain governed its colonies (which were far away and therefore unable to be seen by someone "short-sighted").

'Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar.'

Related Characters: Conradin (speaker), Sredni Vashtar

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Perhaps the most famous quote in the story because it's repeated so many times, "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar" is interesting because it seems like a simple command, but it allows room for interpretation.

On a purely literal level, it seems that Conradin, who has just spitefully sold off the Houdan hen, is asking for Sredni Vashtar to kill (or otherwise dispose of) his cousin, but since he doesn't have the courage to say this out loud, he leaves the request more ambiguous and trusts his great ferret god to understand. But the fact that he isn't willing to voice his real desire aloud might be read as connecting Conradin to Mrs. De Ropp, given that she too can't voice aloud her desire to thwart Conradin. Conradin's inability to voice his true desire aloud could show that he, too, is bound by the rules of respectability that govern Mrs. De Ropp, even as he tries to oppose them.

Given how frequently the story portrays Conradin and Mrs. De Ropp as opposites, however, suggests that the vagueness of Conradin's prayer may also signify something different. Perhaps Saki is suggesting that some wishes like Conradin's are too taboo to speak aloud, even though they would ultimately lead to more happiness.

Finally, the vagueness of Conradin's request also can be seen as the establishment of a new relationship between him and his ferret "god." Until this moment, Conradin's relationship with Sredni Vashtar has been fairly literal. Something happened in the real world, such as Mrs. De Ropp getting a toothache, and Conrad celebrated it with a festival for his "god." But in this moment, by not being literal, by being vague and believing that Sredni Vashtar will understand his intentions behind what he can't bring himself to say, Conradin shows a different sort of faith in the ferret. In this moment, Conradin begins to treat Sredni Vashtar not like a pretend god, but more like a real one.

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.

Related Characters: Conradin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

This hymn, which Conradin begins to chant at a moment when he fears Sredni Vashtar will be taken and send away by Mrs. De Ropp ,is both a parody of the sort of songs Mrs. De Ropp might sing at her church services and the opposite of them. The fact that Conradin's imaginary god even has his own hymns once again proves the power of his imagination. In fact, the hymns could be taken as more evidence that Conradin's imaginary world of Sredni Vashtar has become more than just a diversion for him—it has taken on a role in his life like real religion. He takes solace in these hymns in a moment of desperation, just like a traditional British Christian would do. That the songs are at once bloodthirsty and kind of silly, then, also implies that perhaps the sorts of hymns sung in Christian services could be similarly accused.

Rather than this being a case of Saki simply making fun of Christianity in Britain (suggesting that it's equivalent to a game that a ten-year-old made up in a shed), the focus of this scene seems to be more on praising the power of the imagination. Even Conradin doesn't fully believe his religion is real at this point (since he expects Sredni Vashtar to be defeated in spite of his prayers), but he still derives comfort from it because of how powerful it's become in his imagination. Though Saki satirizes both Christianity and "pagan" religions in the story, there are also moments of "Sredni Vashtar" that acknowledge or even celebrate what a powerful force religion can be in people's lives.

> And presently his eyes were rewarded; out through that doorway came a long, low, yellow-and-brown beast, with eyes a-blink at the waning daylight, and dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Sredni Vashtar, Conradin

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

This quote is from the scene where Conradin is looking out the window of the house and sees that not only has Sredni Vashtar survived his confrontation with Mrs. De Ropp but he even seems to have killed her. The reference to Sredni Vashtar being a "yellow-and-brown" beast, it must be acknowledged here, is Saki's problematic way of linking the creature to Britain's colonies in Asia.) Saki himself was born in the country then known as British Burma and later worked there as a young man, though he spent the majority of his life in England. His portrayal of Sredni Vashtar as a violent pagan god could have been inspired by racist British stereotypes about Hinduism. By today's standards his way of characterizing colonized peoples and cultures in this story would certainly be considered racist.

Still, despite Saki's prejudices, his story paints Conradin and Sredni Vashtar in a much more favorable light than Mrs. De Ropp, who represents traditional ideas about British "respectability." Even though Sredni Vashtar has just killed a person, this quote isn't meant to inspire pity or disgust. In fact, the poetic language of the scene suggests it's supposed to feel like a triumph, like one of Conradin's violent hymns brought to life. Gruesome details like the "dark wet stains" around Sredni Vashtar's mouth don't inspire sympathy for Mrs. De Ropp but instead awe at the power of Sredni Vashtar.

In this moment, then, Sredni Vashtar has accomplished the "one thing" that Conrad asked of him. Mrs. De Ropp has, presumably, been vanquished, and her power and control over Conradin is broken as a result. The story doesn't show what actually happens inside the shed when Sredni Vashtar kills Mrs. De Ropp

> And while the maid went to summon her mistress to tea, Conradin fished a toasting-fork out of the sideboard drawer and proceeded to toast himself a piece of bread. And during the toasting of it and the buttering of it with much butter and the slow enjoyment of eating it, Conradin listened to the noises and silences which fell in quick spasms beyond the dining-room door.

Related Characters: Mrs. De Ropp, Maid , Conradin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

Saki juxtaposes Conradin making himself toast with the

maid going out to find Mrs. De Ropp, whom unbeknownst to the maid is dead. It is a funny moment because of how tonally different the actions of toast-making is from the shock the maid is about to experience. The choice to portray the discovery of Mrs. De Ropp's body as humorous sets the tone for the ending of "Sredni Vashtar." While there might be something shocking about the violent climax of the story, it isn't supposed to be gruesome or sickening. In fact, as the servants of the house become ever more frantic (as marked by the "quick spasms" of sound), Conradin becomes even calmer, making the tonal mismatch even funnier. As a satirist, Saki frequently poked fun at authority figures in an attempt to take away some of their power, and the farcical nature of Mrs. De Ropp's death shows that the "power" she held while she was alive might not have been so powerful after all.

Meanwhile, toast is one of the most significant symbols in the story, and it reappears here at the end of the story. By now, Conradin knows that Sredni Vashtar has survived, and he can safely assume that his cousin has been killed in the process. The fact that he decides to mark this occasion by making toast is significant. Earlier in the story it was revealed that Mrs. De Ropp usually forbid him from eating toast, and when Mrs De Ropp did offer him some toast after she had sold off the Houdan hen, he refused it. Given Conradin's choice to make himself some toast here makes clear that he does in fact like toast, and so his earlier refusal implies that he didn't want any when Mrs. De Ropp was using it as a way to assert her control over him by getting him to accept something "nice" from her after she had done something spiteful to him (i.e. taken away the hen). But now, with the overbearing Mrs. De Ropp gone, Conradin can take real enjoyment in life's pleasures, as symbolized by his making himself the generously buttered toast.

❝ 'Whoever will break it to the poor child? I couldn't for the life of me!' exclaimed a shrill voice. And while they debated the matter among themselves, Conradin made himself another piece of toast.

Related Characters: Maid (speaker), Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

These final lines of the story are significant because while Saki could've written something dark or somber, given the violent events that just unfolded, he chose instead to end the story on a light-hearted note. The fact that a shrill voice is asking how to break the news to the "poor child" is funny because Conradin already knows the news and isn't the least bit distressed about it. In fact, he seems happy and makes himself a second piece of toast.

While the toast is a significant symbol in the story—representing all the little pleasures that Mrs. De Ropp denied him—it is also noteworthy for its insignificance. Just moments after the death of his guardian, Conradin has returned to life as normal. By juxtaposing the hysterical servants with the calm Conradin, Saki shows how the death of Mrs. De Ropp is simultaneously a major change and also not that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things. If the death of Mrs. De Ropp were portrayed more dramatically it would imply that she had more power than she did. Her anticlimactic death deflates her and shows how hollow her seeming victories over Conradin were.

Once again, it makes sense to compare Mrs. De Ropp's fate to Britain's fate with its colonies. While many in Britain at the time believed that their country would always maintain total control over the colonies, just as Mrs. De Ropp maintained total control over her garden, Saki took a more pessimistic view, suggesting that Britain's colonies were like Sredni Vashtar, just waiting for the right moment to strike. Further, Saki is also satirizing the way that Britain saw itself as an essential force that was vital for the benefit of its colonies. Conrad's nonchalant reaction to his guardian's death suggests that, should Britain disappear, the colonies might very well get on just fine without it.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SREDNI VASHTAR

Conradin, a ten-year-old boy, is pronounced sickly by the local doctor, who says he won't live another five years. Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin's older cousin and guardian, endorses the doctor's opinion. To Conradin, she represents "three-fifths of the world": everything that is real and necessary but unpleasant. His imagination makes up the other two-fifths of the world. Conradin fears that one day he too will fall prey to the necessary and dull things that his cousin worries about. He believes that the only thing that has stopped him from becoming like his cousin so far is his own active imagination, which is spurred by his loneliness.

The beginning of the story sets up the central conflict: the clash between Conradin's active imagination and Mrs. De Ropp's dull practicality. The fact that Mrs. De Ropp represents "three-fifths of the world," suggests a pessimistic outlook, where the majority of the world is dominated by such dullness. The "alliance" between the doctor and Mrs. De Ropp illustrates that Conradin is outnumbered. Perhaps this sense of being outnumbered contributes to Conradin's feelings of loneliness, and the fact that these two authority figures agree that Conradin is going to die in five years implies that perhaps his coming death is actually a result of the way that they impose this dull practicality on him.

Mrs. De Ropp, who would never admit to herself that she dislikes Conradin, nevertheless is willing to admit that it is not "particularly irksome" when she must force Conradin to do things he dislikes for his own good. Conradin hates her, but he is able to mask it. He takes pleasure in doing things that he knows would displease his guardian if she knew about them, and he likes the fact that she has no way to get into the realm of his imagination.

Mrs. De Ropp clearly dislikes Conradin, but the narrator phrases things humorously, which establishes a light air behind which Saki can aim his sarcasm at Mrs. De Ropp's self-denial and the way she puts up an outward appearance to hie her inner cruelty. She only allows herself to torment Conradin if she can justify it by saying that she's doing what's best for him, even if that's not actually the case. As the most "respectable" character in the story, Mrs. De Ropp often represents a type of old-fashioned British morality, and the fact that she is so deeply flawed is meant to poke fun at the hypocrisy and inherent cruelty of this type of morality. Conradin himself is less conflicted: he despises his cousin and has no problem admitting it to himself.

Conradin spends his time in a dull garden overlooked by the windows of the house. Mrs. De Ropp is always nearby, ready to open a window to tell him what not to do. There are fruit trees in the garden, but he's not allowed to pick the fruit from them, and they don't produce much fruit anyway. Partially hidden behind some shrubbery, however, there is an out-of-use tool shed, which becomes a haven for Conradin—something like a playroom or a cathedral.

This scene, which describes the garden where Conradin spends most of his time, is a parody of the Garden of Eden story in Genesis *in the Bible. Within the domain of her home, Mrs. De Ropp is God, and Conradin is Adam. Just as God forbade Adam from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Mrs. De Ropp forbids Conradin from taking fruit from any of the trees. The scene is funny in part because of how it differs from the Garden of Eden story: instead of being an earthly paradise like the Biblical Garden of Eden, Mrs. De Ropp's garden is mostly barren, perhaps to suggest that if she is a "god," she's not a very good or life-giving one. The idea of forbidden fruit will also be important: just as Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree, Conradin will seek things forbidden to him by Mrs. De Ropp by going into the toolshed. Later events in the story will reference British colonialism, and the barrenness of Mrs. De Ropp's garden could be read as a comment on Britain's policy of invading foreign lands to strip their resources.*

Conradin uses his imagination to fill the toolshed with "phantoms," some based on history and others that he invented on his own. Two real, living animals also inhabit the toolshed. One is a ragged-looking **Houdan hen** (a French breed of chicken with white or black-and-white feathers), which Conradin lavishes with affection. The other is a large polecat-ferret, which lives in a large hutch (or cage) and which was smuggled into the shed by a butcher boy in exchange for some silver that Conradin had hoarded over time.

Conradin's imagination is powerful, showing that he is far from the dull sickly boy that his cousin believes he is. The way that Conradin mixes history with invention is actually similar to what Saki himself is doing in the story—while the events of the story are made up, some of them are meant to parody or comment on events in history. One important historical fact that will become relevant as the story progresses is that Britain was a colonial power at the time, subduing the locals in distant lands and ruling over them. This process was frequently cruel and generated wealth for Britain, and was justified by Britain as being for the benefit of those they colonized—similar to the way Mrs. De Ropp rules over her own domain and Conradin. The Houdan hen and the polecat-ferret will both be important in the rest of the story, both for advancing the action of the plot and for extending the metaphor about how British government and religion ruled at the time. The fact that the polecat-ferret must be kept in a cage foreshadows that the creature is dangerous.

Conradin is afraid of the sharp-fanged polecat-ferret, but it is also his most valued possession. The Woman (a nickname that Conradin uses for his guardian Mrs. De Ropp) doesn't know that the animal is being kept in the toolshed, and Conradin tries to keep it that way. One day, Conradin comes up with a miraculous name for the creature: Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret. Mrs. De Ropp is religious and takes him to church once a week, but to Conradin traditional church services are an "alien rite" in contrast to the pagan-style religion that he has invented in the toolshed.

Here Saki extends the Garden of Eden parody—just as God didn't see what Adam and Eve were doing when they ate the forbidden fruit, Mrs. De Ropp can't see what Conradin does when he's in the shed. Saki also develops the contrast between Conradin's imagination and Mrs. De Ropp's authority. The pagan religion that Conradin invents is the polar opposite of what he experiences when he goes to Christian church with Mrs. De Ropp. Sredni Vashtar is a made-up name, but it evokes the name of Hindu gods such as Shiva and Vishnu, once again connecting the events of the story to British colonialism.

Every Thursday, Conradin worships Sredni Vashtar with an elaborate ceremony, involving red flowers when they are blooming and scarlet berries during the winter. Sredni Vashtar is a fierce, impatient god—which seems to Conrad to be the opposite of Mrs. De Ropp's religion. On important "festival days," Conradin steals nutmeg and spreads it in front of Sredni Vashtar's hutch. These festivals are irregular and are used to celebrate events such as when Mrs. De Ropp suffered from a toothache for three days. Conradin almost convinces himself that Sredni Vashtar was responsible for the toothache.

The rituals of Conradin's imaginary religion interact with minor events happening in the real world—the real world influences Conradin's religion, and not the other way around. Here, it seems that the misfortunes of Mrs. Ropp, like her toothache, are a cause for Conradin to celebrate. The fact that Conradin's rituals are largely ineffective and based on superstition is a parody of what the British at the time might describe as "pagan" religions. Note, though, that these rituals also invites comparison to the rituals of Mrs. De Ropp's conversative British Christianity, and subtly implies that while such Christian rituals might be seen as serious and meaningful by the British, they might also be looked at as being arbitrary, a bit silly, and just as ineffectual in influencing the real world as Conradin's religion is.

In Conradin's imagination, the **Houdan hen** doesn't join the cult of Sredni Vashtar. He decides she is an Anabaptist. Conradin has no idea what an Anabaptist is, but he hopes it's not "respectable." His cousin Mrs. De Ropp is very respectable, and that is why Conradin detests respectability.

Anabaptists are a religious movement that broke away from mainline Christianity, and as a result, they would not be looked on favorably by more "respectable" British Christians like Mrs. De Ropp. Conradin doesn't know this—he just likes the word—so it's funny that his choice is actually appropriate, and it also shows just how much of Mrs. De Ropp's life—and British religious life in general—is dominated by asserting control by asserting what is and isn't respectable. Once again, Saki emphasizes the connection between Conradin's imaginings and Mrs. De Ropp, showing how Conradin uses his imagination to oppose his stodgy cousin.

Eventually, Mrs. De Ropp begins to notice that Conradin is spending time in the toolshed. She decides that it isn't good for him to be spending so much time there, so at breakfast one morning, she announces that the **Houdan hen** was sold and taken away overnight. As she says this, she looks at Conradin, waiting for rage or sorrow, which she believes she can rebuke with her own excellent reasoning. But a pale Conradin says nothing.

As always, Mrs. De Ropp suspects that if Conradin enjoys something, it can't be good for him—which gives her justification to control and punish him. By taking away the Houdan hen, she is invading the realm of his imagination. This attempt at controlling Conradin's mind is a commentary on what religious conservatives were doing at the time in Britain, as well as what Britain was attempting to do abroad in its colonies—each were engaged in an effort to influence and manipulate what people were allowed to think as a way to maintain control. This section may also be a historical joke: Anabaptists (like the Houdan hen) really were kicked out of England at one point in history.

That afternoon, at tea, Mrs. De Ropp puts **toast** on the table (a delicacy she usually bans on the grounds that it's bad for Conradin and that it causes trouble for her to make). But Conradin doesn't touch the toast. Mrs. De Ropp says she thought he liked it, and Conradin just replies, "Sometimes."

Toast is one of the most important symbols in the story, and it will play a key role later in the ending. It represents all the pleasures that Mrs. De Ropp denies Conradin, supposedly for his own good, but often just out of arbitrary cruelty. Even though he enjoys toast, Conradin refuses it here—perhaps he is still upset over losing his beloved Houdan hen, or perhaps he is just determined not to do what his cousin wants him to do. His refusal of toast is a kind of resistance.

That evening in the shed, Conradin changes the way he worships the "hutch-god," Sredni Vashtar. Instead of chanting praises, he asks for a favor. Conradin does not say aloud specifically what this favor is; he simply asks Sredni Vashtar to "do one thing for me," believing that because Sredni Vashtar is a god, he will know what the thing is. Holding back tears in the shed, Conradin must eventually go back to the outside world, which he hates.

Mrs. De Ropp intensification of her effort to control Conradin by getting rid of the hen seems to have had the opposite of its intended consequence: Conradin begins to intensify his devotion to the pagan religion he's invented. The fact that he does not specify the "one thing" that he wants Sredni Vashtar to do for him suggests that Conradin has begun to conceive of his god as omniscient—another parallel with Mrs. De Ropp's God. Although the narration does not specify what exactly the "one thing" is (and perhaps Conradin himself isn't entirely certain), it is clear that Conradin wants revenge on Mrs. De Ropp for what happened to the Houdan hen. It is also notable that Conradin is now not just celebrating real world events through his religious celebrations; he is asking his god to intervene in the real world, even if his recognition that he has no choice but to return to the world outside the shed suggests that he doesn't actually believe Sredni Vashtar can or will intervene.

Every night in his dark bedroom and every evening in the toolshed, Conradin repeats the same prayer: "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar." Mrs. De Ropp notices that his visits to the tool shed haven't stopped, even after the **Houdan hen** was sold. One day, she goes inside the shed to investigate and finds the locked hutch of Sredni Vashtar. She believes it contains guinea pigs and tells Conradin that she is going to get rid of them.

Emboldened after selling the Houdan hen, Mrs. De Ropp is determined to make her control over Conradin absolute. Meanwhile, and in direct response, Conradin is just as determined to resist her, as shown by his repeated prayers. The intensification of efforts at control lead to an intensification of resistance against that control. The discovery of Sredni Vashtar's hutch sets in motion the climax of the story. Conradin's invented god will face off against the "respectable" authority of Mrs. De Ropp. That Mrs. De Ropp thinks the cage contains guinea pigs does signal the limits of the respectable imagination, which is a potential weakness.

Conradin tells Mrs. De Ropp nothing about what's in the toolshed, so she searches his bedroom until she finds the key to the hutch that he had hidden. She goes right to the shed with the key. Since it is a cold afternoon, Conradin has to stay in the house while she goes to the shed. He can still watch her, however, if he stations himself at the furthest window of the dining room, where the door of the shed is visible just beyond the corner of the shrubbery.

The situation looks bad for Conradin. Despite his prayers, he still believes at this point that Mrs. De Ropp will triumph over Sredni Vashtar, just as she did over the Houdan hen. The fact that Conradin must stay inside the house again shows Mrs. De Ropp's control. But I also helps set up the ending, which has some elements of ambiguity. Because the narration here follows Conradin's viewpoint, it won't be possible to see what actually happens inside the shed.

Conradin watches Mrs. De Ropp enter the shed. He imagines her opening the door of Sredni Vashtar's hutch and peering down with her short-sighted eyes into the thick straw, where the ferret is hidden. He imagines her getting impatient and prodding at the straw. He repeats his prayer one last time, but even as he prays, he knows that he does not truly believe in the power of Sredni Vashtar.

While the scenario Conradin imagines here is plausible, there is no way of knowing whether it's an accurate account of events, since the narration follows Conradin's perspective, and he's watching from inside the house. This reminder that Mrs. De Ropp is short-sighted is significant. In addition to playing a role in the plot, it is a metaphor, and it could be Saki's humorous way of saying that the British Empire (which the respectable Mrs. De Ropp represents) is also short-sighted and therefore blind in its understanding of the sort or degree of resistance its attempts at control might elicit.

Conradin expects that Mrs. De Ropp will come out of the shed with a pursed smile on her face, and then an hour or two later, the gardener will carry Sredni Vashtar out of the hutch—no longer a god, just a simple brown ferret. Conradin believes his cousin will always triumph, just as she's triumphing now, and that he will continue to grow weaker and sicker as a result of all her "pestering … and superior wisdom," until one day there will be nothing left of him and the doctor who believed Conradin wouldn't live another five years would be proved right.

Because he is used to being thwarted by Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin does not expect his ferret god to succeed. It may be significant that Sredni Vashtar is described as "brown," since this would again connect Sredni Vashtar to the inhabitants of Britain's colonies, like India. While Saki's sympathies clearly lie more with Conradin and Sredni Vashtar than with Mrs. De Ropp, his portrayal of Sredni Vashtar as a fierce, "brown," violent pagan could be read as racist, particularly since "Sredni Vashtar" seems to be a pseudo-Hindu name. Conradin's prediction that he will wither and die could be read as a pessimistic prediction of what will happen to Britain (and its colonies) if people like Mrs. De Ropp and the doctor are allowed to triumph over imagination.

Feeling the sting of defeat, Conradin begins to chant a hymn for the endangered Sredni Vashtar. The chant is a battle song about how Sredni Vashtar goes forth, with bloody thoughts and bared teeth, as his enemies beg for peace but he brings them death. All of a sudden, however, Conradin stops his chanting and goes closer to the window pane. After several minutes, the door of the shed is still ajar. Conradin watches birds running and flying across the lawn, counting them again and again, while still keeping an eye on the open door as even more minutes pass.

The violence of Conradin's hymns to Sredni Vashtar indicate the depth of his hatred for his cousin—Mrs. De Ropp's cruelty toward him has caused him to move past the ambiguity of "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar" to explicit calls for violence fighting. The narration's limited perspective allows the story to build suspense, since it's unclear what is happening inside the shed. (Previously, the narration had sometimes included the thoughts of Mrs. De Ropp, but from here until the end, it will follow only Conradin.) While this story is generally very concise, parts of this section deliberately slow the pace for a moment (such as the passage about counting and recounting the birds), in order to mimic the anticipation and anxiety that Conradin is feeling.

A maid comes to lay the table for tea, but this doesn't interrupt Conradin, who continues to wait and watch. He begins to feel hopeful, even triumphant—an unfamiliar feeling after all the time he has spent in patient defeat. Under his breath, he begins to repeat the battle chant.

The presence of servants like the maid reinforces the idea that Mrs. De Ropp is upper class and that she's an authority figure. The suspense builds as Conradin begins for the first time to believe that Sredni Vashtar may be victorious, which underscores how Mrs. De Ropp's efforts here to assert even more control may in fact be a strategic blunder. Conradin has always just assumed he can't really revolt against Mrs. De Ropp, but her increased efforts have made him feel like he has *to resist, which in turn makes the idea of* successfully *resisting imaginable.*

And then Conradin sees it: out of the open shed door walks Sredni Vashtar, with stains of blood around his throat and jaws.. Conradin's ferret god walks down to a small brook at the lower part of the garden, takes a drink, and then crosses a plank bridge and disappears into the bushes.

Although no violence is depicted in this scene, it's safe to assume Sredni Vashtar has killed Mrs. De Ropp, perhaps because of her short-sightedness, just as Conradin imagined. While there is little ambiguity about the final outcome (that Mrs. De Ropp is dead and that Sredni Vashtar escapes), the ambiguity over how this happened allows the events to feel "miraculous," even if there isn't necessarily anything supernatural about what happens. Perhaps Mrs. De Ropp just bent down to look in the cage and the ferret attacked. Or perhaps Conradin's desperate hope and belief empowered his god to greater heights of power. The key point is that the ambiguity about what happened allows Saki to blend the imaginary with the real, demonstrating that the border between the two isn't always clear. Perhaps another reason why the death of Mrs. De Ropp isn't depicted is because it might make her appear more sympathetic, which wouldn't make sense for her character or the story: her role in the story is to be unsympathetic in almost every way.

The maid informs Conradin that tea is ready and asks where Mrs. De Ropp is. Conradin informs the maid that his cousin went down to the shed some time ago. While the maid goes down to fetch Mrs. De Ropp, Conradin begins to toast himself a piece of bread. He draws the process out, using a lot of butter and slowly enjoying eating the **toast**, all the while listening to the sounds of the house.

By now, it's clear what's happened to Mrs. De Ropp, but the story still builds suspense because Conradin knows something that the maid doesn't, and he is curious to see how she'll react. The fact that Conradin can only enjoy toast after he's sure his cousin is dead hints at how she was holding him back and preventing his enjoyment while she was alive. Moreover, the fact that Conradin can enjoy himself at all—that he is literally "toasting" her death—suggests that he feels no sadness or guilt about the death of Mrs. De Ropp. There is a metaphoric connection here to British colonialism. Britain imagined itself as vital and necessary to its colonies, as being good for the colonies, but there is an implication here that the colonies, once free of Britain, wouldn't mourn at all.

First Conradin hears noises, then silence, then the maid screams, and a chorus of others from the kitchen area answer her. Footsteps sound everywhere as they try to get outside help. Then, there is scared sobbing and shuffling as something heavy is brought into the house.

As in earlier scenes, Saki builds suspense by limiting the narration to Conradin's point of view. The commotion of the servants helps to emphasize the seriousness of what just happened—that the death of Mrs. De Ropp will affect more people than just Conradin; that the social order has been overthrown—but it is also comic, mostly because Mrs. De Ropp was so unsympathetic.

Conradin overhears a shrill voice asking who will break the news to the child. The voice exclaims they couldn't for the life of them bear to do it. While the voices outside of the dining room debate what to do next, Conradin makes himself another piece of **toast**.

The irony of this final scene is that while the servants are distraught about breaking the news to Conradin, Conradin himself seems to be happier about the news than anyone. The symbol of the toast reappears, once again emphasizing that this is a joyous occasion for Conradin (and so suggesting that the death of Mrs. De Ropp's brand of respectable British Christian colonialist conservatism will also be a joyous occasion for Saki, and for anyone oppressed by it.

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