



# — Before You Read —

## *The Open Window*

### Reading Focus

People often make assumptions about others on the basis of their first impressions. Has your first impression of someone ever turned out to be wrong?

**Quickwrite** Write about a time when you were mistaken about a first impression. Describe the assumptions you made the first time you met someone, and tell what you learned about him or her later on.

**Setting a Purpose** Read to find out what happens when two characters act on their first impressions of each other.

### Building Background

#### The Time and Place

This story takes place in the early 1900s, at an English country house set on an estate with hunting grounds. It begins on a late October afternoon and ends at twilight the same day.

#### Did You Know?

At the time of this story, hunting was a popular amusement among the upper classes. In "The Open Window," the men are hunting snipe, which are wetland game birds. Bird dogs, such as spaniels, were brought along on a hunt to flush out birds resting in the brush and then to retrieve the felled birds.



### Vocabulary Preview

**self-possessed** (self' pə zest') *adj.* in control of oneself; composed; p. 19

**duly** (dōō' lē) *adv.* rightfully; suitably; p. 19

**moor** (moor) *n.* a tract of open, rolling, wild land, often having marshes; p. 20

**infirmity** (in fur' mə tē) *n.* a weakness or ailment; p. 20

**imminent** (im' ə nənt) *adj.* likely to happen soon; p. 21



### Meet Saki

A master of surprise, H. H. Munro even took a rather surprising pen name when he chose the single name *Saki* (sä' kē). Full of cleverness and wit, his stories make readers both laugh and cringe as they read about the deceptions and cruelties that supposedly civilized people inflict on one another. In 1914 Saki joined the army to fight in World War I. He said that he was glad to be in the trenches, so far from "all the thousand and one horrors of civilization." Saki's stories and three novels have been published in the volume *The Complete Works of Saki*.

*H. H. Munro was born in 1870 in Burma, lived in England, and was killed in France in 1916 while fighting in World War I. This story was first published in Beasts and Super-Beasts in 1914.*

# THE OPEN WINDOW

Saki 

“MY AUNT WILL BE DOWN PRESENTLY, MR. NUTTEL,” said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; “in the meantime you must try and put up with me.”

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

“I know how it will be,” his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; “you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice.”

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

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

“Hardly a soul,” said Framton. “My sister was staying here, at the rectory,<sup>1</sup> you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.”

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

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

“Only her name and address,” admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An undefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

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

1. A *rectory* is the house in which a priest or minister lives.

## Vocabulary

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

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

## THE OPEN WINDOW

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

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window<sup>2</sup> that opened on to a lawn.

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

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

2. A French window is a pair of door-like windows hinged at opposite sides and opening in the middle.

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

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

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

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

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

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who labored under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. "On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

"No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into

### Vocabulary

**moor** (moor) *n.* a tract of open, rolling, wild land, often having marshes

**infirmity** (in fur' mə tē) *n.* a weakness or ailment

alert attention—but not to what Framton was saying.

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

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

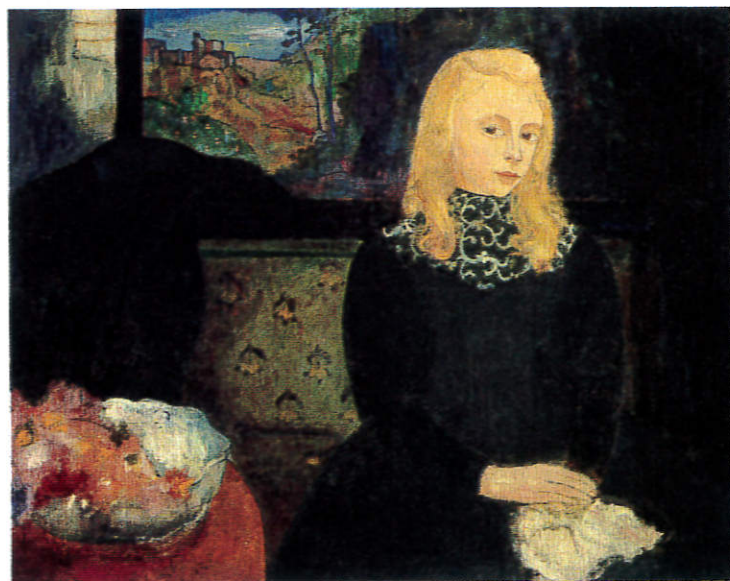
In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window; they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk: “I said, Bertie, why do you bound?”

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

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

“A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel,” said Mrs. Sappleton; “could only talk about

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



*Gabrielle Vien as a Young Girl*, 1893. Armand Seguin. Oil on canvas, 88 x 115 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

**Viewing the painting:** What does this girl’s facial expression convey? What qualities might the girl in this painting share with the niece in the story?

his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of good-bye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost.”

“I expect it was the spaniel,” said the niece calmly; “he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah<sup>4</sup> dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make any one lose their nerve.”

Romance<sup>5</sup> at short notice was her specialty.

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

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



## Vocabulary

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



# Responding to Literature

## Personal Response

How did you respond to the main characters in the story? Describe your reactions in your journal.

## Analyzing Literature

### Recall

1. Why does Framton Nuttel visit Mrs. Sappleton?
2. What does Vera learn about Mr. Nuttel before she begins her story?
3. What "tragedy" does Vera describe?
4. What causes Mr. Nuttel to run from Mrs. Sappleton's house?
5. What do you find out about Vera at the end of the story?

### Interpret

6. What makes Mr. Nuttel a rather unusual visitor? Use details from the story to describe him.
7. How does Vera use the information she learns about Mr. Nuttel to her advantage?
8. What makes Mr. Nuttel especially susceptible to Vera's story?
9. Describe the author's **tone** in the scene of Mr. Nuttel's "headlong retreat." What words or events help create the tone? (See *Literary Terms Handbook*, page R13.)
10. What three words do you think best describe Vera? Give reasons for your answer.

### Evaluate and Connect

11. What was your first impression of Vera? Did it change? Compare your experience of learning about Vera with the experience you described in the Reading Focus on page 18.
12. Would you describe this story as humorous? Why or why not? Use details or events from the story to support your opinion.
13. The author subtly plays with the theme of hunting in this story. How is Vera like a hunter and Mr. Nuttel like her prey?
14. Would you like to be friends with Vera? Why or why not?
15. **Theme Connections** How does this story connect to the theme of this section—"Matters of Life and Death"?

## Literary ELEMENTS

### Plot

The sequence of events in a story is called its **plot**. The plot begins with the **exposition**, or the introduction of the characters, the setting, and the conflict. **Rising action** occurs as complications, twists, or intensifications of the conflict occur. This action leads up to the **climax**, or emotional high point of the story. The climax gives way rapidly to its logical result in the **falling action**, and finally to the **resolution**, in which the final outcome is revealed.

1. Summarize the exposition and rising action of "The Open Window."
  2. What is the climax of the story? How do you know?
  3. Explain how the author intended to surprise his readers in the story's resolution. Was the ending effective? Why or why not?
- See *Literary Terms Handbook*, p. R9.

### Literary Criticism

"The cruelty is certainly there," writes critic Elizabeth Drew about Saki's stories, "but it has nothing perverted or pathological about it. . . . It is the genial heartlessness of the normal child, whose fantasies take no account of adult standards of human behavior." In a small group, discuss whether this quotation applies to "The Open Window" and to Vera.

## Literature and Writing

### Writing About Literature

**Examining Irony** Situational irony exists when the outcome of a situation is the opposite of someone's expectations. Review the conversation Vera has with Mr. Nuttel before Mrs. Sappleton enters the room. Then write a paragraph explaining what is particularly ironic about that scene.

### Creative Writing

**Once Upon a Time . . .** Take ten minutes or so to write a story about the next person who might walk through the door of your classroom. Explain who will walk in; then explore what will happen next and describe the effect the person will have on the class. Check that your story is believable by sharing it with a partner.

## Extending Your Response

### Literature Groups

**Discussing Theme** Who or what is this story really about? Is it about Framton Nuttel? Vera? the open window? Or is it about something else altogether? Discuss your ideas about the story's theme with your group. Together, search for details in the story that help you decide on the theme. Then compare your ideas with those of other groups.

### Internet Connection

**Hunting Down Facts** Hunting remains a popular pastime in today's society. What laws govern hunting in your state? When is the hunting season? Which animals can be hunted and which are protected? Use a search

engine to find Web sites and other on-line documents devoted to some of these aspects of hunting.

### Performing

**Gossip!** With a partner, role-play a scene between Vera and one of her close friends. Vera should tell her friend about how she amused herself at Framton Nuttel's expense. Be sure to explore both Vera's feelings about the situation and her friend's reaction to the news. Alternatively, you might role-play a conversation between Framton Nuttel and his sister after the events of the story. What will he tell her? How will she react?

 **Save your work for your portfolio.**

# Skill Minilesson

## VOCABULARY • Compound Words

The word *chalkboard* is a compound word, a word made up of two other words with separate and distinct meanings. You probably know what the compound means because you know the meaning of its parts. You can determine the meaning of many, not all, compound words by thinking about the meaning of their parts. For example, if you are self-possessed, you possess (and, therefore, control) yourself. Self-discipline is discipline applied to oneself.

● For more about compound words, see **Language Handbook**, Spelling, p. R56.

**PRACTICE** Use your knowledge of the words that form the compounds in the left column to match each with its definition.

- |                   |                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 1. breakneck      | a. dull                                 |
| 2. self-made      | b. a device like a zipper               |
| 3. lackluster     | c. extremely dangerous                  |
| 4. slide fastener | d. to look all around                   |
| 5. rubberneck     | e. successful through one's own efforts |