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Humour in "Sredni Vashtar": Faint and Dark

Ferah İncesu*

Saki's short story "Sredni Vashtar" is centred on deprivation, antagonism and death. Yet, the writer treats the issues in control, indirection and irony. To these is the wistful and frank world of an imaginative child added. Thus, the bitter narration includes humour as well. The polarisation and discrepancy embedded in the subjects and themes of the tale involve and arouse laughter. In parallelism with the child protagonist's inconvenient circumstances and resentment the humour in the narrative is not an easy, light and regenerative type.

The setting and situation Saki draws in this story are gloomy, sterile and dull extending to violence and annihilation. The world of the boy protagonist is hardly bearable and not properly nourishing. The author's style, tone, diction and plot are also strict, neat and very orderly. Still, even such a world hosts humour. The writer's narration and tone disclose the inherent absurdity and flaw of this world, and present the merging borders of order and chaos, respectability and cruelty, bitterness and comedy. The tale displays tinges of humour and humour becomes an integral and inescapable element or state of the crazy/wild human world.

The structure of this Saki story depends on dualities. The plot and themes also operate through binary oppositions. Youth and maturity, childhood and adulthood, life and death, extinction and growth, male and female, animal and human, civilisation and nature, rules and unruliness, dullness and imagination, repression and freedom, reason and passion, order and violence, reality and appearance, Christian and heathen, authority and rebellion are the

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basic polarisations within the text. These contrasts work in the story to such an extent that the reader is presented with a battle, though covertly, and with violence, though indirectly.

Alongside its thematic commotion, the text is a well organised and controlled construction. It conforms to the qualities of good composition, to classical conventions of order with introduction, development and conclusion; the plot is clear and neat; cause and effect relationships are coherent. Its first paragraph fulfils X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia's definition of exposition in their book titled *Literature*: "the opening portion that sets the scene (if any), introduces the main characters, tells us what happened before the story opened, and provides any other background information that we need in order to understand and care about the events to follow." (9) Thus, within one paragraph we learn about the main characters, their connection and the quality of their relationship to one another, and the existence of an urgent problem, the anxiety about which would further our drive to finish the story. The same paragraph even pronounces the very word through which fiction is generated according to Kennedy and Gioia. The writers point to 'dramatic conflict' or 'Problem' as a primary element of fiction and define "a dramatic situation" as "a person is involved in some conflict.... Drama in fiction occurs in any clash of wills, desires, or powers" (9). Accordingly, the exposition of "Sredni Vashtar" introduces the child protagonist Conradin's world as "Mrs De Dropp ... represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real; the other two-fifths, perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination." (83) Thus, the tale unfolds a domain of conflict and restlessness at the very beginning, manifests it with further details and closes it with an end to the struggle.

This orderly organisation of the text is only a surface veneer, though, and imbedded contexts virtually constitute interwoven matters and problematics. The first sentence of the story informs us

about the youth of the protagonist. He is a ten-year-old child. But the expression in its continuation turns into a death sentence, and negates regenerative and fertile anticipations about his future: "the doctor had pronounced his professional opinion that the boy would not live another five years." (83) Whereas in conventional conceptualisation the child represents and recalls the future, prospects, life and life energy, health and activity, the boy in this work is associated with all their opposites. While the tradition visualises the child as the fruit of the family union, Conradin symbolises loneliness. As the opening states "Mrs De Ropp was Conradin's cousin and guardian" (83), we infer that the boy is an orphan. This woman is the legal carer of the child.

The story is a third-person narration yet focalisation is mainly on the protagonist. Thus, the prominent point of view and dominant vision belong to Conradin, and his circumstances, feelings and perceptions are more available to the reader. Carefreeness, happiness, joy and freedom can be supplementary connotations of the child figure. Yet, through the focalisation in the text we see that Conradin's world is one of unhappiness and oppression. The boy's image of his environment is to be found in his inner thoughts conveyed by indirect speech: "One of these days Conradin supposed he would succumb to the mastering pressure of wearisome necessary things—such as illnesses and coddling restrictions and drawn-out dullness." (83) Conradin does not seem to have a home in the traditional sense. The surroundings arranged and dominated by his cousin cannot stand for home to him both physically and emotionally.

There is no mention of a patriarch in the story, and Mrs De Ropp is obviously a widow. As Peter J.W. Taylor informs, Saki became a professional writer after 1899 (Taylor, 82), which classifies him as an Edwardian writer, yet inevitably with the colossal Victorian world's shadow on him. The story is obviously located within this conjuncture though the period is not indicated in it. Thus, it reflects a patriarchal,

restrictive, puritan world, which constitutes a spontaneous contrariety to juvenile needs and tendencies. With the absence of the male head Mrs De Ropp has to take on the social authority over this middle-class household. As the text specifies (84, 85), being a typical female member of this class and a conformist character, she basically functions to substitute the lacking patriarch. As a conventional adult female, she has already acceded to and internalised the rules and codes of her class and society, and through her sense of responsibility, a venerable tenet of the times, she has been trying to implant those into the boy, who is somehow a would-be middle-class patriarch.

Yet, since the environment she represents and presents the boy with is not suitable to a child and since the text conventionally and with a male-oriented vision draws her as a subordinate female, she is a failing matriarch. This failure will be even paid with her life at the end. Lacking the male prowess in social and economic terms as well, the homestead she domineers is deficient too. It is suggestive that though the child is said to be on the verge of death, no specific, definite illness is mentioned. The environment, the conditions Conradin is in are killing the boy. The surroundings cannot provide him with necessary physical and psychological sustenance. The house reflects the qualities, insufficiencies and defects of its owner and keeper. Thus, the narrative covertly points to Mrs De Ropp as an intentional killer, and locates the antagonism into a life and death struggle between the boy and the matron.

Mrs De Ropp not only cannot supply bodily nourishment but also is not a benevolent and affectionate surrogate parent. The abode is with a garden, but shabby, with a shrubbery, which is "dismal": "In the dull, cheerless garden, overlooked by so many windows that were ready to open with a message not to do this or that, or a reminder that medicines were due, he found little attraction. The few fruit-trees that it contained were set jealously apart from his plucking ... it would probably have been difficult to find

a market-gardener who would have offered ten shillings for their entire yearly produce." (83) This is not a garden which does its owner proud copying the plenty and ease at the Garden of Eden. The fruit trees are of poor quality, signalling a deprivation of fresh nourishment and symbolising the child's deprivation of resource of life. In this dull wasteland the child cannot have necessary bodily exercise; the reader does not witness his running, jumping or climbing in fresh open air. His guardian is like a guard to him; with so many windows functioning to convey commands and restrictions, and serving to watch him out instead of being means of healthy fresh air and liberation, the house is a prison to the boy. There is a tool shed he uses as a playroom like a saved country, but deserted, "dim and musty" (84), and he secretly keeps a hen and polecat-ferret and spends most of his time there. Thus, with its gloom, dirt, lack of fresh air and invigorating sunlight it only supplies an unhealthy atmosphere.

Mrs De Ropp has not asked for that child to take care of, but law, a primarily male institution, has enforced her. The text discloses her unwillingness and the boy's existence as a burden to her: "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." (83) The woman does not hesitate to contradict and displease the boy. Yet, even in her own mind she is not free to acknowledge her aversion as she has been brought up through social conventions, which are strict, limiting and shaping the individual. Her embrace of the doctor's prediction might also point out that she tends to use it as another excuse of oppression to exert on the child. It might even be possible that she has made the man talk like that so as to intimidate the boy. Conradin is said to exploit the occasions to disturb the woman after all. While they both try to hide their aversion, free from the adult super ego, the boy is frank in his inner world: "Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could

contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian." (83)

Nevertheless, Mrs De Ropp, the antagonist of the tale within such a framework, is not necessarily an evil character or villainous woman. While in his article "Comic vices and comic virtues" John Morreall indicates the shifting attitudes in Western culture to humour, he cherishes "the idea that humor in which we transcend our personal perspectives can foster virtues such as openmindedness, patience, tolerance, graciousness, humility, perseverance, and courage." (Morreall) Pertinently, in "Sredni Vashtar" the reader at least can comprehend the matron, her stance and motives via the narrative design and its, though slightly, humorous discourse. Mrs De Ropp is just trying to fulfil her social and legal duty being the protagonist's relative. Yet, as she lets herself be just an agent of the "respectable society", which is to introduce and initiate the boy into its ways, she functions as an oppressor and persecutor. From her point of view, as the head of the domestic life and order, she is responsible for the boy's health and self-discipline, which are to be obtained by a certain order, customs and a regular manner of life. He has to be reared as a proper male in the social and class expectations. The child is a site of feelings, emotions, uncurbed passions and imagination, all of which are to be regulated. She banishes the Houdan hen, to which the boy is deeply attached as a psychological need. As the climax of the story, when Conradin's engagement in the garden continues in bad weather she attempts to persecute him, denying his privacy by entering and searching his room for the key of the tool shed.

Within such hostility and confrontation, the faint and dark humour of the text is generated particularly by the diction and the narrative style. Sarcasm, indirection, irony constitute the humour of this difficult and unpeaceful world. Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks accordingly inform, "The forms which humor take vary considerably.

But even the casual observer will recognize a close connection between humor and language. Often humor springs directly from language" (LaFollette). Here Andrew Stott's definition of and contemporary warning about comedy, which is also the title of his book, is relevant, too:

> On the one hand, comedy is a reasonably graspable literary form, most properly applied to drama, that uses stock character types in a scenario where some kind of problem must be resolved. Comedies end happily, often concluding with a communal celebration such as a feast or a marriage. We might add that we would expect a comedy to be funny, and that during the course of its action no one will be killed.... Yet any consideration of what we think of as comedy in the modern day exposes numerous anomalies and deviations from this pattern, and a diversity of linguistic and performance practices.... Comedy is as much a tonal quality as a structural one. While there is a long-standing literary tradition of comedy, 'the comic' is an identifiable mode or tone of writing that manifests itself in a multitude of media, genres, and forms that are not necessarily synonymous with comedy ... what we call comedy is really humour, a specific tone operating free from generic restraints, which, while not the exclusive property of comedy is closely associated with it. (2-3)

Thus, "Sredni Vashtar" is not a comic text but it includes humour, a sense of amusement, a tinge of laughter, a surprise, an inversion, a silent, covert rebellion and criticism.

Andrew Goatly's brief survey in his book *Meaning and Humour* of basic theories in this field can also illuminate the boy protagonist Conradin's uses, induction and agency of humour:

> There are many theories of humour, including superiority theory, in which the inferiority of the targets of jokes and the superiority of those who create and understand them might be highlighted, and the relief or liberation theory based on the

> psychotherapeutic notions of repression. More linguistically oriented theories of humour, however, have built on these two theories by highlighting the idea of ambiguity and bi-sociation, to develop an incongruity theory ... I take **incongruity** to be the major technique for producing humour, though it does not explain the functions or purposes of humour in the way other theories attempt. (21)

Goatly mentions Victor Raskin, Graeme Ritchie, Arthur Koestler, Salvatore Attardo about inconsistency theories. He deduces that "Ambiguity has been long recognised as essential for most kinds of humour" (21) and reminds Ritchie's emphasis on ambiguity "to underlie much, if not all, of verbal humour" (22). Goatly asserts "The importance of these theories is that they stress the reliance of humour on defeated expectations." (23) He both refers to the subversive element of humour, "Humour, then, resembles a temporary carnival, a form of rebellion against normal prohibitions.", and conveys Michael Billig's idea "Humour might, then, express a rebellion against social order" (Goatly, 309). In "Sredni Vashtar", relevantly, it is possible to observe inconsistent elements of the adult world, and the kid's uninhibited, clever but unauthoritative opinions about his reprehensible circumstances, his acknowledgement of self weaknesses yet alongside intuitive and impulsive defiance and censure as survival strategies/defence mechanism reflected mainly through language, maybe not expected from a child in a conservative perspective.

The opening of the narrative also exemplifies this faint humour. Through focalisation the reader learns about Conradin's opinion about his metaphorical executioner: "The doctor was silky and effete, and counted for little" (83). The child in his visualisation undermines the power of this authority figure and negates his sentence. This is an inner rebellion and a sticking to life despite constant and conspired victimisation. Conradin's view also unfolds the artificiality of "respectable society" and secretly subverts patriarchy.

Similarly, the ironic tone and double levelled diction both generate humour and function to uncover unpleasant reality. Mrs De Ropp's thin realisation that "thwarting him 'for his good' was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome" (83) is funny since the controlled, polite, formal tone and expression actually carry a critique of the mistress and strip off her civilised veneer to its stark passion and hostility.

Another verbal humour in the text loaded with reinforcement of criticism is in the passage concerning the fruit trees; they are unavailable to the kid "as though they were rare specimens of their kind blooming in an arid waste; it would probably have been difficult to find a market-gardener who would have offered ten shillings for their entire yearly produce." (83) The diction and tone might seem to be exaggerating, yet expressions are funny and provide further examples of the child's insufficient surroundings.

The image of the Houdan hen in her "ragged" plumage (83) in a corner of the tool shed is also a humorous instance. This female bird in her uneven, uncared and lonely depiction with connotations of being worn out or tormented even becomes an analogy for the lonely, unattractive, old widow Mrs De Ropp, almost thrown at a corner by society with the burden of the boy to attend. Simultaneously, the uncultivated figure of the hen exemplifies the woman's imperfect femininity and domestic failure.

In "Sredni Vashtar" humour is also born out of bitterness and resentment and gets a dark quality. The instances of these evolve around the protagonist's fantasies. As these are related with his rebellion and unruly, passionate drives including egoism and aggression, the humour gets darker tinges. In time the lonely and imaginative child fictionalises the polecat-ferret from a loved but feared pet into a heathen god naming him Sredni Vashtar in exoticism. The name sounds Indian as another indicative of the supposedly English boy's alienation from his native society and

culture. While his guardian cannot succeed to make the boy learn, adopt and like the religion of the society he belongs to, Conradin invents a pagan god to himself.: "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 ... he worshipped with mystic and elaborate ceremonial before the wooden hutch where dwelt Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret." (84) Conradin does not realise Sabbath; for him the woman goes to church on an indefinite day whereas his worshipping day is specific. Accordingly, Thursday recalls to mind the heathen, old Germanic god Thor's day. The child in his inventive, free mind and impulsive nature creates alternative worlds. As an orphan bereft of caring, protective, benevolent parents, he needs a surrogate parent, metaphorically some divinity, god. As well as being loved and respected, he needs to love and to be attached. Thus, he is attached to the female bird on the one hand, and respects and trusts the male carnivorous animal on the other hand.

He presents gifts to the god as well. "Red flowers in their season and scarlet berries in the winter-time were offered at his shrine, for he was a god who laid some special stress on the fierce impatient side of things, as opposed to the Woman's religion, which, as far as Conradin could observe, went to great lengths in the contrary direction. And on great festivals powdered nutmeg was strewn in front of his hutch, an important feature of the offering being that the nutmeg had to be stolen." (84) A wild, free, dark, sensual religion is more compatible with juvenile energies and the need for a release of emotions and impulses. Meanwhile, it is funny and rebellious that the gift is to be acquired by unlawful ways. The Christian god forbade theft; Conradin's behaviour is an expression of nonconformism. His accumulated desire for revenge is also manifested comically by his alternative worshipping: "when Mrs De Ropp suffered from acute toothache for three days, Conradin kept up the festival during the entire three days, and almost succeeded in persuading himself that Sredni Vashtar was personally responsible

for the toothache. If the malady had lasted for another day the supply of nutmeg would have given out." (84)

The verbal humour and metaphorical violence are also to be found in the boy's adoption of words unfamiliar to him: "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." (84)

The last and most effective humorous instance in the short story is located at the very end, in the last paragraph: "'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." (87) The short-sighted cousin goes to the tool shed. Her limited vision, also symbolising her disability to understand the natural and righteous needs of the child, is a disadvantage now in front of the carnivorous animal. After a long time, instead of her, it is the liberated polecat-ferret who comes outside, suggestively with "dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat". (86) Again suggestively as if being thirsty after eating, he drinks from the brook near the garden and departs. Conradin observes these at a window in the dining room. He realises his guardian's death. After the woman has separated him from his dear hen, he develops the habit of asking an unuttered favour of his god alongside his usual praises. While the woman is in the tool shed, he also passionately chants the hymn he has invented for his god to be effective. It is dark and amusing that like black magic, his prayer is answered. His oppressor goes out of his life being killed by the wild cat. When a maid brings tea, bread and butter, as a celebration he makes toasts for himself one after another. He is now free and enjoys himself, he gains appetite. In a scene after the deportation of the

hen, although she disapproves of the boy's liking for toast, Mrs De Ropp offers one to him as compensation because he does not protest her and seems to accept her authority sullenly. Yet, in his repressed sorrow and hatred Conradin rejects the favour reminding the reader of the anorexic refusal of food out of bitterness and disappointment (and also of the poster of this conference). To the guardian's warning he says he sometimes likes toast, which the reader interprets to be when he is in good spirits. This refusal expresses his resistance against her.

In the last scene the boy seems to triumph against the authority. The issues that he is not really free, he would not remain by himself and another guardian, no better than the deceased, might be assigned, or the idea of an orphanage are early to occur in his exultation. His hopes and faith are fulfilled, and his personal god becomes a source of justice now. Thus, the fear and sorrow of the household, and the anxiety and unwillingness of the maids and servants to break the news to him are meaningless and irrelevant. It constitutes dramatic irony that while these people are shocked and anxious, and think it is terrible for the boy, Conradin already knows more and is glad at the event.

The wild animal is the substantiation of the boy's id and a metaphorical extension of him. The conservative woman, who is actually another oppressed character and a kind of victim of the rigid system, cannot transform it and herself, and cannot establish a healthy and constructive communication and relationship with the orphan. In the resolution the reverse of the suggestion at the beginning happens, and instead of the boy the adult dies.

A faint, subtle and bitter humour works throughout "Sredni Vashtar", and is emitted through a special use of language, the controlled diction and aimed tone. Andrew Stott's survey of themes and functions of comedy as humour can provide a summary for Saki's story as well:

> These themes include various forms of inversion, the 'world-turned-upside-down' scenario where slave governs master or man bites dog. Foolishness, intellectual myopia, or the rigid insistence on inflexible systems of being or thinking are ridiculed by transformations of different kinds, investigations of alternative identities, or a relaxation of social codes and a suspension of laws governing the body. The matter-of-fact comprehensibility of language is compromised by linguistic contortions that produce parallel or nonsensical forms of meaning. (2)

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