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Department of English Language Teaching

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Edited by

Çiğdem Pala Mull
Şevki Kömür
Eda Üstünel
Faruk Kökoğlu
M. Önder Göncüoğlu
Orkun Kocabıyık
Suat Cakova

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Barış Yusuf Aydın

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Basım Yeri: Muğla Sıtkı Koçman Üniversitesi Basımevi
Muğla, Türkiye
Tel: +90 252 211 1140

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The Child in "Sredni Vashtar" as a Metaphor of the Resistant Artist

Ferah İncesu

Saki's short story "Sredni Vashtar" is structured on various dualities and forms of antagonism. Within the major dramatic conflict between the orphan boy protagonist and his guardian antagonist it is also possible to trace down an implicit struggle of the resistant artist against the conformist and strict authority. While the child/artist suffers from oppression, neglect and alienation at the hands of his "fellow being", cousin, he continues his art in seclusion, silence and patience as a mode of resistance.

The narrative exploits the figure of the child (Pifer 13-5, 21, 27) in its closeness to the artist figure (Suboczewski 129, 130, Meltzer 414, Skau 164) referring to the future, progress, dissociation from set patterns and rules, egocentricity, impulsiveness, and creativity. The text also alludes to the power of the mind, thought, word and projection. While the child/artist can be victimised and persecuted, he can constitute a real and lethal threat for its opponent. Conradin's eventual actualisation of his wishful thinking, though indirectly, employing his agent/actor, points to faith, hope, optimism and potency. Yet, the temporariness and limitedness of his triumph both manifest the fragility of art and the artist, and what they might stand for, and ask for a wider rehabilitation and revision in the prevalent system in points of humane treatment and modes of order.

"Sredni Vashtar" has a traditionally clear and orderly narrative structure. Thus, the first paragraph functions as exposition and immediately brings the audience to a problematic and unhappy environment:

> Mrs De Ropp was Conradin's cousin and guardian, and in his eyes she represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real; the other two-fifths, in perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination. 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. Without his imagination, which was rampant

> under the spur of loneliness, he would have succumbed long ago. (Saki 83)

A setting of polarisation and struggle is drawn just at the beginning of the narrative alongside a positioning of the oppressor and the oppressed, authority and resistance, open expansionist legitimised attack and secretive self-protectionist counter-structure. The tale simply discloses and makes use of the fundamental, mundane, universal phenomenon of generation gap, and conflict between parent and child. The definition of the term in *Encyclopedia of Psychology* is helpful to observe and understand the major characters' clash in "Sredni Vashtar":

> Commonly observed problems and conflicts in the different forms of interaction between young people and members of the older generation (youthful protests against rules made by parents and teachers, sometimes also demonstrations against political decisions –which are generally made by members of the older generation). Possible explanations for these phenomena: (a) incompatible attitudes in the two age groups: a conservative attitude aiming to maintain the benefits of past achievements on the part of the older generation, and a tendency for the younger generation to be progressive, force changes, and improve traditional patterns by innovation; (b) a stereotyped approach on both sides to members of the other group; young people consider their elders to be obstinate, obstructive and outmoded, while they themselves are accused by their elders of showing an inadequate sense of responsibility, lack of experience and idleness ("generation gap").

The kid is very resentful of the physical, social and emotional environment his custodian provides him with. As guardianship is a legal institution and position, and Mrs De Ropp is middle class (Saki 85) referring to already acclaimed dominance of that class in British society and to set patterns of behaviour and stance, the surrogate parent is endowed with societal authority and legitimised superiority to the disadvantaged and underprivileged child. Thus, Conradin is in a position of subordination and superficial resignation. Since he cannot dissociate himself from that realm governed by the adult, through pretension and duplicity he attempts at passive rebellion generating an alternative realm inside and outside, concretely and abstractly.

The child as a discontented subject of the adult power and order employs thought power and generates a speculative realm. The manor

house and its facilities are not functional for the child, nor do they appeal to ordinary juvenile needs. The narrative draws the physical conditions in a negative and depreciative mode: "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.", and "a dismal shrubbery" is mentioned (83). Thus, the garden under the responsibility of Mrs De Ropp does not reflect the archetypal image of the Garden of Eden as land of profusion and contentment. Mrs De Ropp is neither a good representative of divine providence nor a meticulous benefactor. The infertile, arid physical surroundings seem to symbolise and become an extension of the rigid and unproductive antagonist, who is supposedly childless. The boy at an age of bodily growth is deprived of fresh nourishment. The lack of fresh fruits symbolises the deprivation of resource of life for the boy, who is said in the introduction to be eleven years old but to die in five years' time. The multitude of windows, a symbol of economic and social efficacy ("window tax"), constitutes another medium of humiliation and repression for the child. While in another respect windows may stand for access to the outside, thus, freedom and release, and function as means of health providing both fresh air and sunlight when opened, and protection and warmth when closed, for Conradin they become messengers of rules and bans. Thus, the house's image is drawn more like a prison, and the guardian seems to function more like a guard to the boy. The windows seem to serve to watch him out. In her surveillance and restriction the adult alludes to the cruel and forbidding God in the Old Testament.

As his escape to freedom and relaxation, the child can only go to another unhealthy environment: "In a forgotten corner ... was a disused tool-shed" (83) which is "dim and musty" (84). This enclosed space obviously lacks fresh air and sunlight, two factors of healthy growth while mildew points to decay and dirt. Moreover he keeps two animals in this dark, airless and unclean place.

Conradin is in position of an only child. He is left alone to his own means to entertain, amuse and support himself. He is in social and emotional deprivation. His adult cousin does not cherish the boy and his developing personality: "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) She does not

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hesitate to contradict and displease the boy. The narration indicates that she regards the child as a burden. Looking after him is a social and legal duty put on her shoulders by the system she is in. Yet, as an adult whose super ego has been already formed, she has internalised the prevalent norms and moral codes of society and thus bereft of a free mind she even cannot express to herself her real thoughts about the orphan. Her quick adoption of the doctor's prediction about the boy's end also illuminates her subconscious wish for the orphan's disappearance from her life. Meanwhile, the omniscient narrator's description of the doctor as "silky and effete" and note that "his opinion was endorsed by Mrs De Ropp" (83) even might mean that the two collaborate to promote this idea as a means of controlling the boy more easily. In a way the guardian takes medicine or science, another institutionalised social power on her side. Improperly, the boy is allowed to know the prognosis. It is suggestive that though the child is announced to be on the verge of death, no specific, definite and fatal illness is declared.

Under these circumstances with a literal and figurative capital sentence on him, Conradin tries to survive and enjoy himself as much as possible and resists the adult authority. The primary vehicle in this struggle is his mind power and imagination. In his mind he turns the uncomfortable tool-shed into his free zone and territory: "He had peopled it with a legion of familiar phantoms, evoked partly from fragments of history and partly from his own brain" (83). To satisfy his ordinary human and juvenile needs he also turns to the two animals. "In one corner lived a ragged-plumaged Houdan hen, on which the boy lavished an affection that had scarcely another outlet." (83); as well as being loved and respected he needs to love and be attached. As an orphan bereft of sincerely caring, protective and benevolent parents, he needs a surrogate parent, metaphorically, some divinity, too. Thus, Conradin's secret place, his "haven" is indicated to carry "aspects of a play-room and a cathedral." (83) In return for a quantity of small silver, another secret from the cousin, he takes a caged large polecat-ferret from a butcher-boy. Conradin first turns the wild animal into a pet, then as it is too awesome for him, into a divinity: "Its very presence in the tool-shed was a secret and fearful joy, to be kept scrupulously from the knowledge of the Woman, as he privately dubbed his cousin. 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." (84) Like a storyteller spinning a tale, Conradin devises an elevated status for the animal. As the tool-shed is his private land, this animal stands for his free world too. The Woman is not to come to the knowledge of Sredni Vashtar in the way she

cannot come to a knowledge of his inner world. At the beginning of the story the borders are already described: "from the realm of his imagination she was locked out—an unclean thing, which should find no entrance." (83) As we see, the unconsciously disliked and subconsciously persecuted child is full of reactions about Mrs De Ropp so much so that he wipes out her name in his mind whereas his animal is given a cool one. Since the kid has no guardian angel, he makes up a guardian devil to himself: "Conradin was dreadfully afraid of the lithe, sharp-fanged beast, but it was his most treasured possession." (84) As he is aware that though he is its owner, it is wild and lethal, the boy thinks of using its fatal potential imaginatively in his resistance against the Woman.

Actually, Conradin is alienated from his roots, his society and its customs. Because his guardian evokes dislike and detachment in the child, everything associated with her is regarded by the boy in the same degraded manner. Thus, Conradin's mind is closed to learning anything about Christianity as it is the Woman's 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." (84) He even does not know of Sabbath; on an indefinite day the woman goes to church whereas his worshipping day is specific. Reinforcing his nonconformist, blasphemous, pagan stance, it is Thursday, heathen old Germanic god Thor's day. A wild, free, dark, sensual religion is more compatible with juvenile energies and need for a release of emotions and impulses:

> 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 ... 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. ...On one occasion, 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. (84)

It is obvious that the child expects his god to help or support him in his silent rebellion. The narration here faintly foreshadows the eventual incident. In his suppressed anger the child enjoys the Woman's pain. With all his secretiveness, duplicity and resentfulness, Conradin is not the traditional or romantic figure of the innocent child. He has a dark, diabolical side. But unlike the woman, as a child his social formation has not been completed yet, and he is with an uncurbed id and he can be honest to himself: "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). He is in a silent battle with the Woman, yet as the narrative discourse conveys, the scope of his actions is limited.

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Actually, it is his guardian, his flesh and blood that has taught him lovelessness and destroyed seeds of empathy. Figuratively being short sighted as well as a literal one, engaged solely in doing "the right thing", she wants to prevent his seclusion in the shed "in all weathers" (85) and sells the hen. Moreover, she never warns the boy first or explains anxieties concerning his health. Further, at breakfast she abruptly announces what she has done overnight. One should eat in peace and enjoy his meals, especially a child to grow up. It is obvious that these spiritless circumstances are killing the boy. The narrative alludes to a life-and-death struggle between two parties. Since the boy is deadened with shock and grief, the Woman supposes his silence to be obedience to her authority. As a kind of compensation, at teatime she gives him toast, which we learn is an indulgence to the boy: "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." (85) Yet, from his perspective as an expression of passive protest but also dangerously suggestive of anorexia, he rejects it, thus her favour.

Robbed of his love object, the child looks for divine justice. While he is trying to get it through his animal-god, he engenders a poetic one. "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar." (85), he tells many evenings and nights. He assumes he has not been defeated yet; he has hope and faith in his personal god as a source of justice.

When Mrs De Ropp observes his ongoing involvement with the hutch, she presumes guinea-pigs to be the attraction and immediately declares banishment for them. Denying and disrespecting the boy's privacy, she "ransacked his bedroom till she found the carefully hidden key" (85). In this cold afternoon ordered to stay indoors, at the window in the dining-room Conradin looks at the shed the Woman is busting. He feels totally helpless and depressed as he is on the verge of losing the only remaining animal or being dear to him. In his mind he visualises possibilities. First he recalls her victories and sees his forthcoming end: "that pursed smile he loathed so well on her face ... he would grow ever more sickly under her pestering and domineering and superior wisdom, till one day nothing would matter much more with him, and the doctor would be proved right." (86)

But this time, positioning is reversed and the child suggestively watches her out. Whereas an improper and untimely issue of death concerning a child begins the narration, it ends with the adult's death. The narration does not stage the attack scene; the point of view foregrounds the finalisation of constraint and the boy's release. In the resolution the child openly becomes a figure of the artist as well. Beforehand, concerning his hatred he is said to be "perfectly able to mask" (83); "chocking back a sob as he looked at that other empty corner" (85). He restrains his anger, sadness and humiliation as a sign of resistance against the Woman. In a way he keeps a sense of honour and self integrity. His daydreams and wishful thinking, his individuation via his inner world and his secret play-room/theatre all constitute a subculture, an underground aesthetic movement and a counter-revolution. In his survey of the wide range of relationship between art and politics Noël Carroll, accordingly, reminds: "Art in opposition to politics can also be referred to as protest art, subversive art, or social criticism." (Carroll 13) Now at the desperate slow passing moments of this final battle, as a manifestation of his survival instinct, like an inevitable indefatigable reflex Conradin raises his voice in faith: "he began to chant loudly and defiantly" (86). From the litany his asking favour transforms into a hymn, a poem of praisal for the wild animal:

> 'Sredni Vashtar went forth,
> His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white.
> His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death.
> Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful.' (86)

When he understands that the Woman is finished, he repeats it as a form of song, "the paean of victory and devastation." (86)

As this militant version of his projection comes to be true, Conradin's art and thought power allude to black magic. What he wishes, what he visualises is concretised; insubstantial words evolve into reality. In a way applying remote control Conradin gets rid of the adult authority. On the literal level it is logical and realistic that the wild, imprisoned, hungry animal would use the first occasion to get free and feed itself. On the metaphorical level the carnivorous animal is an embodiment of the child's id. Conradin feels restricted, neglected, despised and deprived under his cousin's domination; he is like a caged animal of middle size. He has accumulated and suppressed passion, fury and aggressiveness like the imprisoned ferret. In its liberation and assault the polecat takes Conradin's revenge.

In another respect, Conradin's fiction comes to be true. He has already made up a tale, even a legend around an animal. He has given a

role to the animal to play, actually a mission to fulfil. Conradin uses words to create a reality. He applies to imagination and mind power to arrive at tangible results. He employs thought power to realise his wish and aspiration. In analogy, he produces art to change the world, the world as he has come to know solely through Mrs De Ropp, "the world he so hated." (85) In its relevance and reference to aesthetics, rebellion, struggle and change Conradin's art is revolutionary art. Yet, as it never directly talks of protest and subversion concerning Mrs De Ropp, it metaphorically constitutes art in general. The point of view in "Sredni Vashtar" is third person, yet focalisation is on the boy protagonist. So, the audience receives the narration through Conradin's perception, from his perspective. The reader knows that the child is not happy with his living conditions at all. They have to be changed. In this respect narrative voice and discourse is on the child's side. Figuratively, the child protagonist/the child artist is supported by the work of art. Carroll, in his overview of art and politics, warns that "One may not find it advisable to suppose that every aspect of art is involved in politics." and that "Art is not essentially social criticism. Too much of it is either critically mute politically or involved in uncritical political advocacy." (Carroll 13, 15) He proceeds to conclude that "Nevertheless, social criticism and protest represent one avenue of art, an avenue increasingly traveled since the eighteenth century" (15). He also recalls theorists like Herbert Marcuse for whom "art itself is essentially (rather than contingently) a form of progressive social criticism, since the artwork, by means of such core art-making structures as fiction and representation, provides alternatives to what exists and, thereby, effectively argues for the possibility of social change" (14).

Conradin's fiction includes topics of dignity, beauty, omnipotence, omniscience, protection, care, freedom and justice. As an allusion to free thought and freedom of belief, for example, he imagines the Houdan hen to be an Anabaptist, an advocate of the idea that "baptism should only be administered to adults" (Taylor, ed. 84) who accept Christianity by their own decision instead of their family's declaration at their babyhood. Yet, both the drama played by Conradin in which he pretends to be a submissive, sullen, silent, harmless boy and the fiction he spins around the animal also include themes of cheat, idolatry, egoism, passion, aggression and murder. Within the dynamics of art their presence is integral as art also hosts destructive or ugly aspects of existence. Conradin's art does not distort reality, but embraces it entirely and impartially.

Meanwhile, Saki's art also discloses art's limitation and fragility in the overall human world. Irene Suboczewski, accordingly, points to the artist's dysfunction against military and political plights (Suboczewski 134). For example she speaks of the artists' review of the idea of the artist as superman after the two world wars: "the humbling realization that their ability to influence, let alone shape, events or human behaviour was negligible." (134) Fiction produced by Conradin, imagination employed by him, his inner world, and even real results of his mental potentiality constitute prowess, hope and resistance against neglect, injustice and oppression. The end of the short story finalises the dominance of the adult and shows the child's celebration by eating the forbidden toast even twice. But as *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* indicates, dénouement/unknotting and resolution are different concepts. Dénouement constitutes "the event or events following the major climax of a plot, or the unravelling of a plot's complications at the end of a story or play." ("dénouement") Resolution means "Those events which form the outcome of the climax of a play or story." ("resolution") The outcome of "Sredni Vashtar" is indefinite and questionable. The narrative is open ended. Conradin's triumph is a transitory one; his exultation is momentary. As Peter J.W. Taylor informs, Saki became a professional writer after 1899 (Taylor, ed. 82). Thus, he was an Edwardian writer, whose world was also shaped by the earlier colossal Victorian period. As a middle class child supposedly of those times, Conradin cannot remain free and by himself. Referring also to some nineteenth century novels, and illuminating the subsequent periods, in her research on the eighteenth century real and fictional orphans, particularly with social status, Cheryl L. Nixon associates guardianship with a "valued orphan" (1-34). Another guardian would be assigned for Conradin and might be no better than the deceased.

Meanwhile, Mrs De Ropp is not an evil force. After deporting the hen, observing the boy's white face and spiritless countenance, she allows for toast, showing her sense of compensation. While working for the expectations of the male oriented society and order, she loses her life with the agency of a male child and his male pet. The narrative voice symbolically denies her individuality; she is without her proper name. She has no private life, individualistic contentment and fulfilment. Even in her own mind she is not free. As a typical middle class mistress, she is the head of domestic life and order. She is responsible for the boy's health and self discipline through customs and a regular manner of life because he has to be raised as a proper male for his class. She has been brought up through Victorian conventions, which are strict, limiting and

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curbing the individual. She cannot strip herself off them. She is not progressive. Her conformism is her defect and mistake, and she pays for it with her life. As a conservative and traditional person she cannot overcome, transform or rehabilitate society's customs, patterns and manners concerning children. She does not attempt to establish a humane, warm, trustworthy, supportive relationship with the child. Her generation was lacking in psychology and pedagogy, but being not a kind and compassionate, or an imaginative and empathic person, she does not invent any of them either.

In "Sredni Vashtar", the adult figure, stuck in older manners and opinions, functions like a dictator, strict, cold and unkind, generating an untrustworthy, insincere and insecure environment. The child figure in confrontation holds on and produces art as a medium of resistance. Like an underground artist he generates counter culture. Art gives him courage and belief to continue and carry on. Yet, in the text revolutionary art is also blemished and bloody thoughts materialise bloodshed. The open ending points to mundane, real humane relationship, rehabilitation and reform.

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The Sacramental Fea

Feryal Çubukçu

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