SAKI'S FANTASTIC CREATURES IN 'TOBERMORY', 'SREDNI VASHTAR' AND 'GABRIEL – ERNEST'

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Abstract: *The writer Hector Hugh Munro (1870-1916) best known to world's audience as Saki (the cup-bearer in the 'Rubaiyat' by Omar Khayyam), wrote many short-stories in which he included the supernatural, the macabre, the horror, the satiric and the comic side, creating an interesting and capturing world. We find Hindus influences in his works due to the fact that he was born in Burma – India.*

Saki's fame rests in his inventiveness and humor that won him a definite place among witty social satirists as Oscar Wilde and Evelyn Waugh. His works – humorous sketches can be compared with those of Mark Twain and O'Henry due to the fact that he succeeded in establishing in English literature the quiet, neutral, apparently indifferent and unemotional style.

Among his volumes of short-stories is worth mentioning: 'The Not So Stories', 'Reginald in Russia', 'The Toys of Peace' etc. and three novels: 'The Rise of The Russian Empire', 'The Unbearable Bassington' and 'When William Came'.

With the help of this article I will try to introduce Saki to Romanian readers, to go inside some of his most interesting stories where sometimes we are shown absolutely common events and other times supernatural elements like (wolves, tigers, bulls, but especially dogs and cats). I can conclude with this short presentation of Saki's works using this quote'Whimsical in their plots, light hearted and cynical in their tone, these stories are also given a dark side by Munro's memories of his unhappy childhood '(1996:147).

Keywords: *Fantastic animals, humor, horror, mysterious children, mottos*

Saki wrote about 135 short- stories which were included in several volumes- the most relevant: 'The Chronicles of Clovis' (1911) and 'Beasts and Superbeasts' (1914). Each of his stories is carefully built, having an unusual/unexpected ending and a motto in the beginning which synthesizes the entire plot. By reading the motto, the reader is offered a small but important clue in discovering the moral that is hidden in the apparently common story. Noel Coward stated some remarkable things about Saki's way of constructing his plots and characters: 'His stories and novels appear as delightful and, to use a much abused word, sophisticated as they did when he first published them. They are dated only by the fact that they evoke an atmosphere and describe a society which vanished in the baleful summer of 1914. The Edwardian era, in spite of its political idiocies and a sinister sense of foreboding which, to intelligent observers, underlay the latter part of it, must have been, socially at least, very charming. It is this evanescent charm that Saki so effortlessly evoked'. (1982:XIII).

Saki or H.H.Munro has a myriad of shot-stories but in my article I will only stop to analyze three of them: "Tobermory", 'Sredni Vashtar" and "Gabriel- Ernest", each representing a perfect example of fantastic versus real, English humor versus American and European humor.

Hector Hugh Munro uses a satirical tone although he seems to have a detached attitude towards his characters – he only tells the story, trying to transmit indirectly his experience and beliefs to the reader.

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We as consumers of Saki's work, are invited in a mysterious, supernatural and fantastic world that is timeless, capturing our attention with short but precise descriptions of nature, characters and even events that determine us to finish reading each tale, immediately starting another one.Saki's sharp satire of the Edwardian scene is still valid today and many of his irony victims can surely be found in our modern society.

Among Saki's most frequently anthologized short stories is 'Tobermory', in which a cat, who has seen too much scandal through country house windows, learns to talk and starts to repeat the guests' vicious comments about each other. The story has a very suggestive motto' Only imagine that your cat could talk...' (1989:24), making the reader conscious of this disaster or maybe happiness. In 'Tobermory', the cat that speaks, tells dreadful truths about its masters – Lady Blemley and her husband along with their guests; it practically reveals the deepest thoughts of the characters, bringing to light their feelings and opinions one toward each other.

This excessive and destructive honesty frightens everyone so much that the plan the poor cat's murder by putting some strychnine in the scraps that Tobermory always gets for dinner. The scene in which the entire story's characters sit quite at the dinner table expecting for Tobermory to make an entrance is full of suspense, nerves and tension. To their surprise the cat doesn't show itself that night to eat 'carefully dosed fish scraps…',(1989:42) making its murderers to leave the 'job' undone and go to bed at approximately two o'clock.

The second day, after finishing breakfast, they all received stunning news: Tobermory's corpse was found dead in the shrubbery, it had bits on his throat and the yellow fur probably from an unequal combat with the big Tom from the Rectory. The end of this short story is both ironical – Lady Blemley wrote an extremely nasty letter to the Rector about the lost of her valuable pet, and tragically because Tobermory's teacher was killed by an elephant in the Dresden Zoological Garden.

In 'Tobermory' Saki employs science fiction, creating an unreal world were animals could speak, so they could utter all the secrets of their masters putting them in an occurred position. The writer tells the story in a serious tone, making Mr Appin's scientific discovery seem normal and at the same time possible.

Clovis Sangrail one of the characters of this story, is featured in other two of Saki's short stories: 'The Unrest Cure' and 'The She – Wolf'. This character is one of the writer's preferred individuals who serve as a vehicle in mocking the aristocracy and in poking fun at the upper class which is pampered and led a superficial lifestyle. In fact, critics sustain the idea that' Everything is made credible by the presence of characters such as the famous Reginald and Clovis- not very well defined but permanently felt as embodiments of the typical Englishman: most gentlemanlike, so well-bred as not to take notice and even less so to be disturbed or emotionally involved in anyting taking place around him, never to speak otherwise than in a low, sedate voice' (1996:151).

The end line of 'Tobermory' belongs to this ironic character – he makes a remark regarding Mr Appin's faith 'he deserved all he got' (1989:43). We as readers can continue this statement by saying: 'because he interfered in things that weren't of his concern'.

Another tale in which Hector Hugh Munro uses science fiction elements, fantastic and mystic elements is 'Sredni Vashtar'. Here, a sick and delicate ten year-old

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child succeeds in turning a half-savage ploecat into a pagan God which he venerates and adores. The boy had surrounded himself with a 'legion of familiar phantoms' (1989:108) where a 'ragged-plumaged Houdan – hen' (1989:108) and that polecat ferret became his both his friends and family. Conradin (the boy's name) turns to Sredni Vashtar (the polecat) –his god in order to fill in his interior loneliness and also fill his life with purpose. This unreal God helps the child focus on other things rather than on the deep hatred that he had for his cousin and guardian Mrs. De Ropp. The motto of this story 'Hatred in an English garden' best sums up its entire plot, the boy's tragedy in a hostile world.

Saki first gives hints of Mrs. De Ropp symbolic status to Conradin when he mentions "The doctor was silky and effete, and counted for little, but his opinion was endorsed by Mrs. De Ropp, who counted for nearly everything."(1989:108) At this point in time we have no background what so ever for Mrs. De Ropp, so how can her opinion be more valuable than that of a doctor on the medical condition of patient. Furthermore, while in Mrs. De Ropp's presence Conradin never displays any signs of happiness, if anything we see signs of hate and discontent. Even more when Mrs. De Ropp becomes sick Conradin rejoices, and doesn't bother to think of her.

Due to this tense and hostile situation between Conradin and his guardian, the mystic god becomes the center of universe for the boy, worshiping 'with mystic and elaborate ceremonial before the wooden hutch where dwelt Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret.'(1989:113)

The idolatrization of Sredni Vashtar goes so far that the boy composes a prayer for him:" 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' (1989:116). This short poem shows the boy's affection for his friend, master and confident – a simple object that had captured his soul. Mrs De Ropp hatred is in antithesis with the unique bond between Conradin and his God.

The culminant moment when Conradin turned himself into a fervent believer took place after Mrs. De Ropp announced that she had sold the Houdan hen, since then the boy obsessively asked for one thing from his God. He developed a ritual – 'every night, in the welcome darkness of his bedroom, and every evening in the dusk of the tool-shed, Conradin's bitter litany went up: Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar'. (1989:114)

At the end of this fabulous story, Saki offers us an unexpected end – the mysterious death of Mrs. De Ropp which stands in contrast with the calmness of Conradin who seems to know beforehand of this event. The interesting thing is the suggestion that Sredni Vashtar had something to do with the guardian's death, practically it had fulfilled the boy's wish – that „ one thing' he repeatedly asked for. The disappearance of Mrs. De Ropp can be interpreted as a fight between god and bad, life and death where god won with the help of a supernatural power, setting the boy free.

Another tale in which Saki obviously uses the same fantastic elements which tend to be horror is 'Gabriel- Ernest' – the name of a werewolf – a human boy who at night transforms himself into a terrific animal. The plot of this story is normal until a certain point when Van Cheele – one of the main male characters decides to go for a walk in his 'woodland property' (1989:164). Here he meets a young, strange and sort of savage boy who sustains the dreadful idea that he lives in the woods and feeds on flesh like: ' rabbits, wild-fowl, hares, poultry, lambs in this season, children when I can get

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any'.(1989:166). From this point on the story has horror accents introducing the reader to a terrible world – that of a wolf-man. Saki turns his creation in a certain way that he makes his characters humanize this animal: Van Cheele's aunt decides to take Gabriel-Ernest in the house, to give him a proper bath and some clothes without knowing the truth about this boy. She even arranges for Ernest to '…help her entertain the infant members of her Sunday-school class at tea ...' (1989:176) and later that day she decides sending him to take the little Toop child home.

This decision helps to create a morbid atmosphere, a tragic end for an innocent child. Little Toop and Gabriel- Ernest were never seen since that day, but 'the latter's discarded garments were found lying in the road, so it was assumed that the child had fallen into the water, and that the boy had stripped and jumped in, in a vain endeavour to save it' (1989:180). Gabriel's protector – Mrs Van Cheele, never found out the truth about him and she continued to mourn him, ' It was on her initiative that a memorial brass was put up in the parish church to Gabriel-Ernest, an unknown boy, who bravely sacrificed his life for another'. No matter how tragic the situation is, we as readers can not help laughing about this incredible twist of events – a murderer, an animal that feeds on human flesh is kept in the memory of some people as a great savior, hero or even better a martyr.

'Gabriel – Ernest' is another sample that Saki: ' marked one step forward in the tradition of English humor, in fact setting the peculiar stamp of 20th century Anglo-American humor (paralleled by Jerome K. Jerome and G.K. Chesterton in England, by James Thurber in the United –States)'.(1996:150)

This tale could have a coded message inside of it, a moral that Saki was trying to transmit in an indirect way – with the help of his characters: never believe that one can overcome his condition or do not be mislead by appearances. "Gabriel-Ernest' is also a firm example of Saki's way of introducing situations – in an absurd manner 'but this indifferent, nonchalant manner of relating event wins us over to an attitude of indulgent credulity'.(1996:151).

These three short-stories reflect Saki's genius, his remarkable capacity to combine his imaginary world with the real-palpable one. As a Romanian critic said: 'One of the main aspects of his craftsmanship, besides the agreeable vocabulary, the quiet tone etc. is his capacity for skillfully concentrating a whole story (including years of narratives or events of a whole night in forest etc) within the normal space for a sketch – several pages'.

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