

LITERARY ANALYSIS: TONE AND AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

A writer's **tone**, or attitude toward a subject, can often reveal his or her **purpose**. Just as you might use one tone of voice to make a joke and another to criticize someone, writers use different tones to accomplish different purposes. A writer's tone may be playful or solemn, sarcastic or admiring. Figuring out the writer's tone can help you decide what his or her purpose might be. As you read Saki's famous short story "The Open Window," ask yourself

- Does the narrator's description of other characters reveal whether Saki is portraying them in a favorable or an unfavorable light?
- Does Saki use formal or informal language? What effect does this create?

Review: Point of View

READING STRATEGY: PREDICT

To make **predictions** about characters, try the following strategies:

- Think about each character's personality. How might someone with these traits respond to conflict or to new situations?
- Consider different characters' actions. What might happen as a result of these actions?
- Use your own experience. If you were ever in a situation similar to the one in the story, how did it turn out?

As you read "The Open Window," stop occasionally to predict what might happen next. Record text clues that help you make reasonable guesses, and check your predictions against what actually happens.

Text Clues	My Prediction	Actual Outcome
Mrs. Sappleton has had a "great tragedy." (line 26)	She will still be very sad, even though it happened years ago.	

Author Online

Also Known As . . .

"Saki" is the pen name of Hector Hugo Munro, a British author best known for his satirical short stories. Munro was born in Burma, a country in Asia then controlled by the British. When he was very young, his mother was killed in an accident. His father sent Munro and his siblings to England to be raised by their aunts, two old women who believed in old-fashioned discipline.



Saki
1870–1916

Saki's Saga When he was 23, Munro returned to Burma to join the military police. Stricken with malaria a year later, he gave up his badge and his pet tiger cub and returned to England to try his hand at writing. As he embarked on his literary career, he picked up the name Saki from the *Rubáiyát*, a long poem by 12th-century Persian writer Omar Khayyám. Although he wrote nonfiction, political cartoons, novels, and plays, Saki is most famous for his short stories, which are praised for their whimsical humor and shrewd social criticism. When World War I began, the writer rushed to enlist. During a night march through France in 1916, he was shot and killed by a German sniper.



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on Saki, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Background

Ridiculing the Rich "The Open Window" depicts the world of the British upper class in the early 1900s. Saki, himself a member of the upper class, often ridiculed the customs of high society. For instance, he made fun of the fact that people were expected to present formal letters of introduction when visiting strangers and poked fun at the "nerve cure," a trip to the countryside to treat anxiety.

The Open Window

SAKI

“My aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel,” said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; “in the mean-time you must try and put up with me.”

Framton Nuttel endeavored to say the correct something that 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 toward helping the nerve cure¹ which he was supposed to be undergoing. **A**

“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
10 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,² you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here.”

20 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.³

A TONE AND AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Paraphrase lines 3–7.

So far, how would you describe Saki's tone, or his attitude toward this character? Explain your answer, citing evidence.

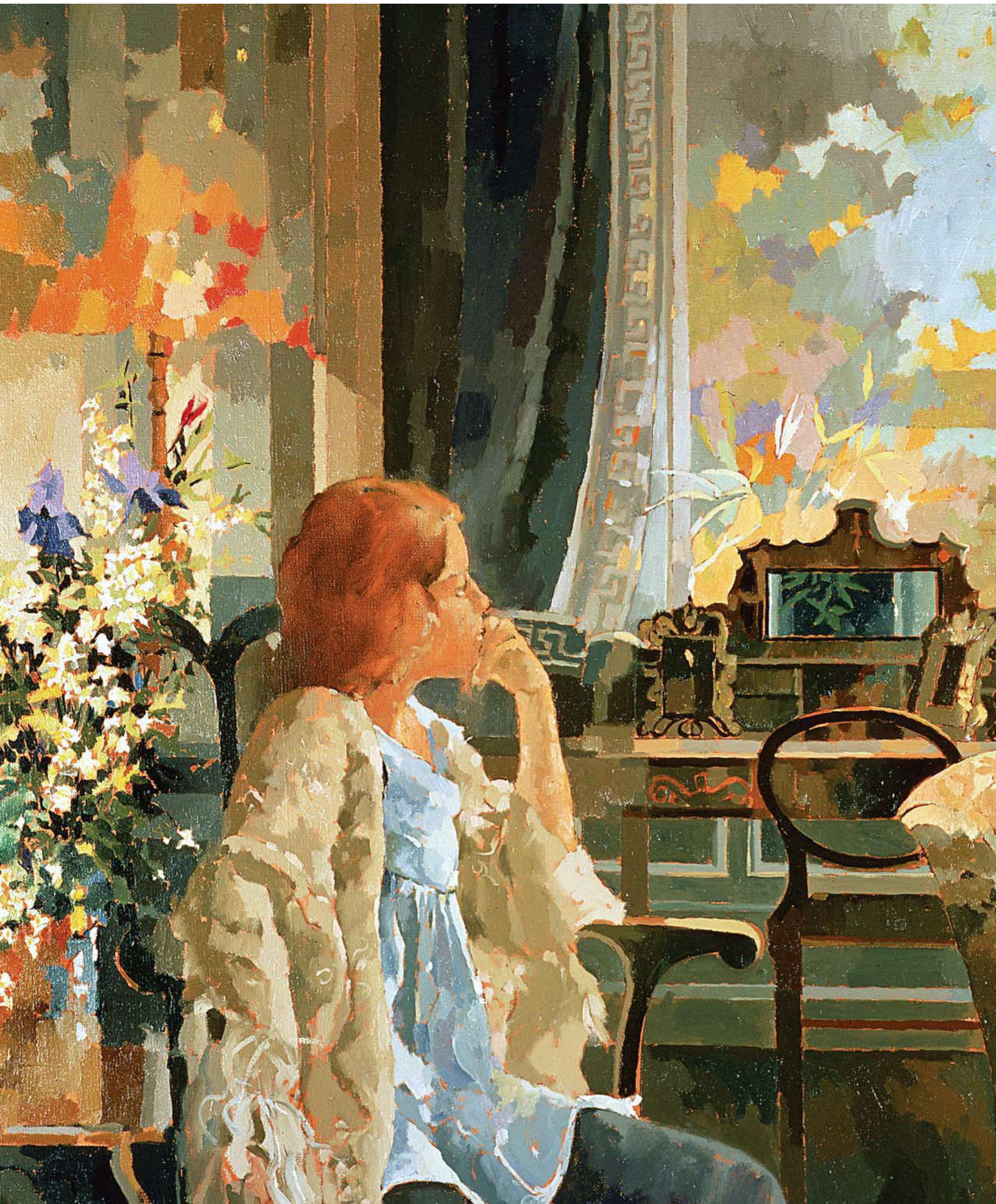
ANALYZE VISUALS

The narrator describes the niece as “self-possessed,” or confident and in control. In your opinion, does the young woman in this painting look self-possessed? Explain, citing the **details** that influenced your opinion.

1. **nerve cure**: a treatment for nervousness or anxiety.

2. **the rectory** (rĕk'tə-rĕ): the parish priest's house.

3. **masculine habitation**: that men lived there.



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

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

30 “You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon,” said the niece, indicating a large French window⁴ 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?” **B**

“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 by 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
40 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 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
50 in through that window—”

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. **C**

“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 menfolk,
60 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.

B POINT OF VIEW

Is this story told from the **first-person** or the **third-person** point of view? Explain how you determined this, citing evidence.

C PREDICT

Will Nuttel say anything to Mrs. Sappleton about her “great tragedy”? Give reasons for your prediction.

4. **French window:** a pair of windows that extend to the floor and open like doors.

“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 widespread 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. **D**

“No?” said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into 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 toward 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 toward 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. **E**

“Here we are, my dear,” said the bearer of the white mackintosh, 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 his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of goodbye 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 Ganges⁵ by a pack of pariah dogs⁶, 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 anyone lose his nerve.”

Romance⁷ at short notice was her specialty. 

D TONE AND AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

Is the language Saki uses to describe Nuttel’s endless discussion of his health formal or informal? Explain the tone this language helps convey.

E GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 89–91. Saki uses the **adverbs** *wildly* and *dimly* to emphasize Nuttel’s desperate flight from the house.

5. **Ganges** (găn’jēz’): a large river in northern India.

6. **pariah** (pə-rī’ə) **dogs**: dogs that have escaped from their owners and become wild.

7. **romance**: highly imaginative fiction.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Describe the “great tragedy” that Vera relates to Mr. Nuttel. According to Vera, why does her aunt keep the window open?
2. **Recall** Why does Nuttel leave so abruptly, and how does Vera explain his frantic departure?
3. **Paraphrase** Reread the story’s final line. Then restate it in your own words.

Literary Analysis

4. **Draw Conclusions** A **surprise ending** is an unexpected twist at the end of a story. Reread lines 15–25 and think about Vera’s behavior. Now that you know how “The Open Window” ends, what would you say was Vera’s **motive** for asking Nuttel each question listed in the chart shown?

Vera’s Question	Motive
“Do you know many of the people round here?” (line 15)	
“Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?” (line 21)	

5. **Evaluate Predictions** Review the chart you created as you read. How accurate were your predictions? If they were very accurate, describe the clues that allowed you to make such on-target guesses. If your predictions were off, explain how Saki caught you by surprise.
6. **Analyze Point of View** Saki uses a **third-person omniscient narrator** in “The Open Window.” The narrator is an outside voice that gives you access to the thoughts and feelings of all the characters and relates events that may be happening simultaneously. How would the end of this story be different if it were told exclusively from Nuttel’s point of view? Explain your answer.
7. **Analyze Tone and Author’s Purpose** Think about Saki’s use of formal language to describe silly situations, as well as his depiction of Mr. Nuttel. From Saki’s tone, what can you infer about his purpose? Explain what he might be trying to tell his readers about people like Mr. Nuttel. Cite evidence from the text to support your analysis.

Literary Criticism

8. **Critical Interpretations** According to critic Rena Corb, the “successful ending” of this story depends on “the reader’s belief, along with Nuttel’s, that Vera is telling the truth.” Whether you, like Nuttel, fell for Vera’s story or you knew she was lying to her **guest** all along, explain why you agree or disagree with Corb’s assertion. Support your opinion with evidence from the selection.