

Nicholas: victor or victim?

I have read Sredni Vashtar, The Lumber-Room and The Holy War and have noticed that they have many similarities. Religion is a theme in all three stories. In The Holy War the title itself has religious connotations, suggesting a conflict over a very important issue, and the hooting of owls is described as “Vespers”. In Sredni Vashtar Mrs De Ropp’s Christianity is contrasted with Conradin’s fierce and impatient religion, while in The Lumber-Room the aunt exploits Christianity in an attempt to frighten the children into obedience. Saki does not deny life a spiritual dimension, but he does not seem to have doubts about the value of conventional Christianity. Nature often seems a more important force in his short stories. In The Holy War the garden and its animals represent nature. Thirza makes “improvements”, introducing order, monotony and profit, and is appropriately, killed by a wild swan. In Sredni Vashtar, Conradin’s only companions are a Houdan hen and a polecat-ferret. Nature also takes revenge in this story, Mrs De Ropp being killed by Sredni Vashtar. In The Lumber-Room, depictions of nature— an embroidered hunting scene on a fire-screen and a book about birds— are important elements in the story. Nature seems to be of particular significance in these stories because it appeals to the imagination of males. In The Holy War, Revil Yealmton regards the house and garden as an “earthly paradise” and “his desired land”. Conradin’s imagination, “rampant under the spur of loneliness”, converts “a simple brown ferret in a hutch” into “his wonderful god”. Nicholas’s imagination gorges itself on the many “objects of delight and interest” that he discovers in the lumber-room. Imagination helps the males to endure and gives meaning to their lives. All three stories are based on a single struggle between a male and a female, which the female loses eventually. The Holy War is an exception because the struggle there is between husband and wife. As the story is set in the Edwardian period, it is not surprising that Revil, the husband, gets his own way. The other two stories centre on conflicts between male children and female adults who are not their parents. Despite having authority, resources and privileges, the females are deflated and Saki clearly invites us to enjoy the victories of the male underdogs, Conradin and Nicholas.

There are, however, major differences between Nicholas and Conradin. Conradin is ill and has only five years to live. He hates his guardian and is desperately lonely. His only two companions are the polecat-ferret and the Houdan hen. He is used to suffering defeat and definitely does not expect to triumph over his guardian. The ending and victory are a major surprise to him and the reader. Nicholas, on the other hand, is not ill or lonely and does not hate his aunt. Victory is not a matter of life and death to him, but he is bored and mischievous and enjoys outwitting his bossy aunt. He is cleverer and more resourceful and resilient than Conradin. The latter is extremely fortunate to receive victory; the former plans and achieves a deserved victory.

Despite Nicholas's cunning, he is still an underdog and is victimized by his aunt in many ways. She exploits Christianity in an effort to frighten him into obedience and when this fails she punishes him by excluding him from "hastily inverted" treats. He is also denied small pleasures such as strawberry jam merely out of spite. More important is the lack of stimulation for Nicholas's imagination. The house is dull and bare and the aunt does not realize how important it is for children's lives to be varied and interesting. If the children behaved perfectly all the time, they would never get "a special treat". In some ways, then, Nicholas is a victim, but his aunt has not managed to break his spirit.

Although Nicholas is victimized sometimes, he does have many victories. Some are fortunate and some are minor, but he enjoys them all. Nicholas starts the day by contriving a victory. He proves the "older and wiser and better people" wrong by deliberately placing a frog in his bread-and-milk. He dwells on this victorious start to the day "with the insistence of a skilled tactician", but keeps silent about his main victory. He played this practical joke in order to be excluded from a treat because he wants the other children out of the way when he tries to enter the lumber-room. His aunt does not know this and hopes that the happy mood of the children as they depart for Jagborough Cove will make Nicholas envious, but fortune does not favour her. One of the children scrapes her knee on the carriage step and cries. "How she did howl", said Nicholas cheerfully. His aunt tries to remove the smile from his face by telling him that the children will enjoy racing about on the "beautiful sands". Nicholas denies this, observing that Bobby's tight boots will prevent him from enjoying himself. The aunt angrily demands to know why Bobby hadn't told her about his boots. Nicholas says he told her twice, but, as often, she was not listening. Nicholas is running rings around the aunt and she knows it. In a desperate bid to regain the initiative, she imposes an additional punishment, banning him from the gooseberry garden. It appears that Nicholas's insolence has got him into more trouble, but he turns this extra punishment to his own advantage. By loitering near the gooseberry garden, he convinces his aunt that he wishes to enter it, so she remains there on "sentry-duty" most of the afternoon. Meanwhile Nicholas slips into the lumber-room. After a while the aunt begins to worry and she tries to trick Nicholas into revealing his whereabouts by claiming that she can see him. Nicholas knows that this is a desperate bluff and smiles victoriously to himself in the lumber-room. Deciding that Nicholas must have succeeded in entering the gooseberry garden, the aunt goes in search of him and falls into the rainwater tank. This is another stroke of luck for Nicholas and he capitalizes on it. By skillfully declining to rescue her, he leaves her trapped for thirty-five minutes. Events go from bad to worse for her. The other children return and she learns that the "special treat" was a disaster. In her haste to arrange the trip she forgot to check the tide times. The tide was at its highest so there was no sands to play on. Moreover, Bobby's tight boots put him in a foul mood so Nicholas's prediction was correct. The aunt's punishments have backfired and, ironically, the intended victim has enjoyed himself more than anyone.

Nicholas's most important victory is getting into the lumber-room and having his imagination stimulated, although he may not be fully aware of its significance. The lumber-room is full of "objects of delight and interest" that make it a refreshing

contrast with the house, which is “rather bare and cheerless”. It is a “storehouse of unimagined treasures”, compared with which even the gooseberry garden is “a stale delight, a mere maternal pleasure”. Nicholas finds many “wonderful things for the eye to feast on”. The metaphor indicates that his imagination has lacked nourishment. His attention is caught by a tapestry fire-screen that shows a hunting scene. “To Nicholas it was a living, breathing story.” Saki conveys Nicholas’s fascination by using direct questions and making him ignorant of perspective. He sits “for many golden minutes” considering the possible outcomes of the hunting scene. The metaphor shows the value and quality of Nicholas’s imaginative engagement. Moments later Nicholas is rapt again. Opening “a large square book with plain black covers”, he finds many colour illustrations of exotic birds— “a whole portrait gallery of undreamed-of creatures”. As he examines the “colouring” of a Mandarin duck, he finds himself “assigning a life-history to it.” These imaginative responses have enriched his experience and made him alert and curious. His pulse seems to be beating faster now, for the quality of his life has improved.

Feeding his imagination in the lumber-room is Nicholas’s most important victory, but the one he enjoys most is refusing to help his aunt out of the rain-water tank. He relishes this because he gives her a dose of her own medicine and exposes her as a liar. He does it in such a clever way that she cannot punish him. When she orders him to fetch a ladder, Nicholas pointedly reminds her that he is barred from the gooseberry garden, so obliging his aunt to make a concession. His claim that she may be the Evil One tempting him to be disobedient is revealingly dismissed as “nonsense”, but Nicholas decides, for once, to resist temptation and be virtuous. He then appears to falter, asking “innocently” if there will be strawberry jam for tea. Seeing her chance, the aunt says there will be, though she “privately” resolves that Nicholas will not get any. This characteristically spiteful decision makes the reader fear that Nicholas is about to be tricked. However, he was only pretending to be gullible and now that the aunt has taken the bait she finds herself trapped by Nicholas’s ingenious logic: he proves that the voice is the Evil One’s and therefore refuses help. Nicholas has used the device of the Evil One to avoid accusing his aunt directly, but the implications of his case are clear to all parties and it is she who has “sold” herself. She cannot punish a virtuous boy and disputing his care would involve humiliating admissions and further loss of face. The adult has been outwitted and exposed by the underdog.

Just as Saki used the toast to underline Conradin’s victory at the end of Sredni Vashtar, he uses the tapestry to suggest Nicholas’s sense of triumph in the Lumber-Room. Like the toast; the tapestry appears twice and is used to convey different moods at different stages of the story. However, its function seems to be even more important than that of the toast. The description of the tapestry appears in the centre of the story and forms its heart. When it is described the texture of the writing changes. There seems to be more pressure behind the language as Saki uses vivid imagery and catches the rhythm of Nicholas’s mind to convey his fascination with the hunting scene. The presentation of the tapestry foregrounds it to such an extent that it seems to become a story-within-a-story. The hunter and his dogs, the wounded stag and the approaching wolves appear to connect with the main narrative in interesting ways. Nicholas’s first response to the scene is pessimistic: “He was inclined to think that there were more than

four wolves and that the man and his dogs were in a tight corner.” At this point Nicholas is the hunter, the stag is the aunt, the arrow in the stag represents the frog in the bread-and-milk and the wolves may see justice. Nicholas is still thinking about the tapestry at the end of the story, but now his conclusion is more optimistic: “It was just possible, he considered, that the huntsman would escape with his hounds while the wolves feasted on the stricken stag.” By this stage Nicholas has succeeded in excusing himself from rescuing his aunt from the rain-water tank and has learnt that the other children did not enjoy their day at Jagborough Cove. These two events undermine the aunt’s attempts to punish Nicholas and his spirits soar. His final opinion of the scene depicted on the tapestry reflects his happiness and growing sense of confidence in his own abilities. He is still the hunter and his aunt the stag, but now the arrow in the stag may correspond to the aunt in the rain-water tank. The dogs stand for Nicholas’s conscious tactics, while the wolves represent his imagination and resourcefulness. The wolves will feast on the stag just as Nicholas’s hungry imagination devoured the contents of the lumber-room. Saki often seems to underwrite his male characters by connecting them to nature and wild animals and his female characters are denied this bond. Thirza Yealmton is killed by a wild swan after spoiling her husband’s paradise and Mrs De Ropp is killed by Conradin’s polecat-ferret, so it is not too far-fetched to assume that the wolves will be Nicholas’s ‘allies’ in his battle with his aunt. Nicholas has won the battle and proved himself other “wiser and better” than his hypocritical and vindictive aunt, but will he win the war? Her “frozen muteness” at tea that evening suggests that she will seek revenge in the near future.