

# **The Technique of the Frame Tale:**

A Study in the Short Stories  
of H.H. Munro (Saki)

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**الأسلوب الفني للحكاية المؤطرة:  
دراسة القصص القصيرة للكاتب مونرو (زاكي)**

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## **Abstract**

Art for art's sake is a characteristic feature of modern literature. The concentration on form and language began assuming greater importance than ideas. This trend led to the appearance of the metafictional novel which is a novel about the art of writing novels. Such novels have a Frame Tale and series of stories embedded within the major one. This narrative technique can also be traced in some short stories, especially of the famous British short story writer Hector Hugh Munro (Saki) (1870-1916).

The present study aims at showing how Saki employs the Frame Tale technique to draw the attention of his readers to the best and the worst way to tell a short story. Two of his well-known short stories; "The Open Window" (1914) and "The Story-teller" (1914) are chosen as examples.

### **Key Words:**

Frame Tale, Technique , short story, Saki , embedded , narrative , metafiction.

## المخلص

إن شعار الفن من أجل الفن قد أصبح من السمات المميزة للأدب الحديث. أن التركيز على اللغة والشكل بدأ يأخذ أهمية أكبر من الأفكار هذا التوجه قد أدى إلى ظهور ما يسمى "ما وراء السرد" وهو عبارة عن رواية تتحدث عن فن كتابة الرواية. روايات كهذا تتكون من قصة مؤطرة وسلسلة من القصص الضمنية المنطوية داخل الإطار العام. أن هذا الأسلوب الفني يمكن ملاحظته أيضا في بعض القصص القصيرة وخاصة قصص الكاتب البريطاني المشهور هكتور هيومنر، المعروف بأ(ساكي) (1916-1780).

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى بيان كيفية استخدام ساكي أسلوب القصة المؤطرة ليجلب اهتمام القراءة إلى أفضل وأسوأ الطرق لسرد القصة القصيرة. لقد تم اختيار قصة "الشباك المفتوح" و"القاص" كأثلة لهذا الغرض.

## **A Preliminary Note**

Binding a series of short stories in a frame is a familiar narrative technique adopted by the early story-tellers. The function of this frame is to tie up the individual tales into one coherent story especially if those tales are not narrated by one single teller. The frame story supply the other stories with a unifying structure as pictures are encircled by a frame (Sarhan 31). Accordingly, to Gerald Prince, the frame narrative is “a narrative in which another narrative is embedded; a narrative functioning as a frame for another narrative by providing a setting for it”. (Prince 52) It is also called a frame story and a sandwich narrative. The Frame Tale is the main narrative that sets the stage for other shorter stories that might be called the secondary narratives. The outstanding examples of Frame Tales include Kalila Wa-Dimna, One Thousand Nights and One, Boccaccio’s Decameron and Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. In these stories, the characters create a web of stories by telling them themselves (Mallette 1). The Frame Tale is marked by “its recursive structure, its plasticity, its self- reflexivity” (Ibid.). As a result, sometimes metaphorical phrases like “Chinese boxes”, “Russian dolls”, “boxing tales”, “novella”, “story within story” and “embedded narrative” are used to refer to the episodic nature of such tales.

Postmodern literature in general, revolted against the rigid, traditional rules of genre distinction, “Postmodern Paradox, ambiguity, irony, indeterminacy, and contingency are seen to replace modern closure, unity, [and] order” (Hutchen xi). The term ‘Metafiction’ is used to describe some novels that broke away from the conventional standards of writing novels. The first to use this term is William Gass in his essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” (1971) in which he asserts that “many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafiction” (Gass 15). Though the term metafiction is new, but according to Patricia Waugh, it

originated in such early novels, “like Don Quixote (1604), Tom Jones (1749), and Tristram Shandy (1760)” (Waugh 24). Metafiction is a narrative technique that limits itself to the art of telling a story. It is a novel about the art of writing a novel. Its main focus is on the art of telling a story.

John Barth defines the metafiction as “novels which imitate the form of a novel by an author who imitates the role of Author” (Barth 60). Mark Currie asserts that the conventions of the metafiction are older than the novel itself. According to him this practice can be seen in Kyd’s and Shakespeare’s play within a play and in the epistolary forms in Seventeenth and Eighteenth century poetry and fiction and the intrusion of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. For him Lawrence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy and Northanger Abbey of Jane Austen are actually metafictional in spirit (Currie 14). Raymond Federman agrees with Currie and adds that the metafictional novel is basically self-reflexive (Federman 18). Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self - consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact” (Waugh 2). According to her the function of a frame in a fictional work is similar to that in like “everything is framed, whether in like or in novels” (Waugh 28), since both of them are constructed through frames.

Despite the fact that novels and short stories belong to the same race; the fictional world, the metafictional technique of using narrative frame and other imbedded narratives can be seen in some modern short stories. The short story is an independent literary genre; it is one of the oldest narrative forms. It is a short piece of prose narrative that concentrates on a certain situation; single plot and setting. The short story focuses one character or on a limited number of characters and limits itself to a short period of time. Accordingly, the short story should not be seen as a little novel. Though the length imposes some differences yet “the various narrative techniques of the novel are applicable to

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the short sort as well” (Abrams 286). It is usually built round common elements which include setting, plot, conflict, characters, theme, style and narrative technique. The short story is of many kinds; the Comic, the Romantic, the Gothic, the Romantic Comedy, the Satirical and Tragic.

Whenever the witty, satirical short story is mentioned H.H. Munro (1870-1916) is remembered. He is usually known by his pseudonym Saki. For many, Saki is considered the master of the short story. Munro died in France during World War 1, in 1916 by a German sniper. His style is elegant, economical and witty.

### **Hector Hume Munro (Saki): A Biographical Sketch.**

Munro was born in Burma to Charles Augustus Munro and Mary Frances Mercer. He was the youngest of the children. After the death of his wife, Munro’s father, an officer in the Burma Police, decided to send his children to live with their aunts in England (Bryne 3). Saki did not like the lifestyle of his strict aunts. As a result, aunts in his short stories usually serve antagonists (Drake 6). Generally, there is a dearth of biological information about Saki since all we have is the biography written by his sister Ethel (Drake 7). Under the name ‘Saki’, Munro published 138 short stories, five plays, two novels, and dozens of sketches, political satires and essays (Gibson 5-6). Saki’s collected short stories include *Reginald* (1904), *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911) and *Beasts and Super Beast* (1914).

Saki’s stories are actually practical jokes with dramatic reversals and unexpected endings. His mischievous protagonists direct their wit towards their foolish victims. The target of his satire is the prosperous Edwardian society. His ‘well-made’ stories can be best understood and appreciated by well-educated readers. As a satirist, Saki has his object, the fools and hypocrites who overestimate themselves. His satire is not vindictive or invective, it is rather a practical joke played on a boastful or braggart character. The popularity of Saki’s short stories resides

in their harmonious blend of satire, witty dialogues, irony, shocking endings, unconventional settings, psychological insight and sometimes a mixture of mystery and horror.

### **The Open Window**

“The Open Window” (1914) talks about the misfortunes of a man called Framton Nuttle who moves to the countryside to cure his nerves according to his doctor’s advice “The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement and a voidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise” (Window 290). Though he is eccentric and hypochondriac, physically speaking there is nothing wrong with him. His sister, who lived in that area before gives him letters of introduction to his new neighbours. The story moves round his visit to the Sappletons. The story of Mr. Nuttle serves as the Frame Tale in Saki’s “The Open Window” which contains other secondary stories. The writer chooses Mrs. Sappleton’s niece; Vera, to tell these stories. She is clever and “very self-possessed young lady of fifteen”. (Window 288) She is bored and looks for some excitement and therefore decides to play on Mr. Nuttle’s loneliness and his critical psychological state. She asks such questions as “Do you know many of the people round here?” and “Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?” (Window 289) to take advantage of the situation.

Exploiting his total ignorance of the place and its people, she begins her story with the supposed “tragedy happened just three years ago.” (Window 289). She tells him that her aunt’s “husband and her two young brothers” and their Spaniel dog drowned in a swamp in a swamp and “Their bodies were never recovered” and that her aunt does not want to believe that they are dead and she keeps the French Window open because she expects their return one day. Vera as a skillful story teller seems to lose her “self-possessed note” (Window 289) when talking about her aunt’s mental and psychological state so as to impress her listener. She prepares the listener to her story, supplies it with a

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setting and creates a suitable sinister atmosphere. The sudden appearance of the aunt creates a situational irony.

“I hope Vera has been amusing you?” she said “She has been very interesting” (Window 290) said Framton. The aunt tells him that she expects her husband and brothers to get home at any moment and therefore she left the window open and “To Framton it was all purely horrible” (Window 290). When the aunt remarks “Here they are at last!” Vera “was staring out through the open window with a dazed horror in her eyes” (Window 291). Her reaction is intended to arouse Mr. Framton’s suspense and fear. The three figures appear in twilight with Mrs. Sappleton’s brother singing as he used to do. Supposing them to be the ghosts of Mrs. Sappleton’s husband and two brothers:

Framton grabbed widely at his stick and hat; the hall door, the graved drive, and the front gate were aimly noted stages in his head long retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision (*Window 291*).

Like Saki’s short stories, Vera’s embedded short story is a kind of a practical joke which has unexpected ending. Vera as a protagonist and story teller directs her wit against a foolish victim. Her well-knit story has all the characteristics typical of Saki’s short stories. In addition to the presence of a clever protagonist and surprising end, it has unconventional setting, horror, irony and interest in psychology.

To justify the panic and sudden escape of Mr. Framton, Vera uses her skill of storytelling to create another story. The victims in her new story are her aunt and the three men. She fools her listeners by fabricating a story about Framton’s phobia of dogs:

“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 Ganges by a pack of Pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make anyone lose their nerve”. (*Window* 291)

The major theme in Saki’s “The Open Window” is the power and skill of storytelling. By using Vera as a story teller, the writer aims at conveying his message on the art of story - telling. The voices and Saki and Vera blend to fool their listeners. By using her wit and her skill of storytelling, Vera convinces her listeners (Framton, the reader, her aunt and the three Man) that her stories are credible which turn out eventually to be fantastical and comic. Saki rounds up his Frame-Tale by praising his protagonists imaginative skill by saying “Romance at a short glance, was her speciality” (*Window* 291)

Saki’s “The Story-teller” (1914), as the title indicates, is another story about how to tell a story successfully. The Frame-Tale opens on a hot summer afternoon with an aunt in a railway carriage with her two nieces and a nephew. On the opposite seat there sits a stranger; a bachelor. The children are restless and keep asking many questions. The aunt keeps scolding and instructing them. For example, she tells the boy, Cyril not to hit the Cushions and to enjoy the views outside. She fails to silence him since he begins asking questions about a farmer and his sheep that he sees through the window. The young girl tries to recite a poem to kill boredom but she remembers only the first line that she keeps repeating.

The aunt decides to tell the children a story in an attempt to teach a moral lesson to encourage them to behave well. She tells them about little girl who is saved by a bull attack because of her goodness. Her story does not impress them since it lacks the characteristics of a good short story; the suspense, the wit, the setting, the atmosphere, the dialogue....etc. The older girl

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embarrasses her by asking the logical question “wouldn’t they have saved her if she hadn’t been good?” (Storyteller 320 ) for which the aunt gives a stupid answer “Well, yes....but I don’t think they would have run quite so fast to her help if they had not liked her so much” (Storyteller 320). Her story is intended to show them the reward of being morally good. He story could not communicate that lesson since it is dry and not impressive. The reaction of the older girl is that “It’s the stupidest story I’ve ever heard” and the boy asserts “ I didn’t listen after the first bit, it was so stupid” (Storyteller 320).

The bachelor who is the protagonist and the good storyteller of the embedded story, can no longer keep silent criticizes her story and her method of telling it. She claims that it is difficult to tell children, a story that they can both enjoy and comprehend. To prove his contradictory attitude, the bachelor challenges her by telling the children a story.

The bachelor also talks about a girl who is also “extraordinarily good” (Window 320). The children are discouraged, but the bachelor’s language and his willingness to answer all of the questions impress them. He tells them that the girl’s name was Bertha and won medals always pinned to her dress. He impresses them by describing her as “horribly good” (Storyteller 320), The word ‘horribly’ connected to goodness is a novelty that fascinates the children. The word used in connection with goodness is a novelty that comments itself. Her behaviour as so good to the extent, that a prince invites her to spend a day in his beautiful park. The story immediately arouses the children’s suspense and they begin asking questions about the flowers and the animals in the Park. The bachelor answers all of question wittingly without hesitation. He concludes his story with horror and unexpected closure and when he tells them that a wolf gets into the park and Bertha hides behind a bush. When she begins trembling, her medals start clinking, the thing that draws the attention of the wolf to where she hides. As a result, the wolf

“dragged Bertha out and devoured her to the last morsel. All that were left of her were her shoes, bits of clothing, and the three medals for goodness” (Window 323). The moral lesson of the bachelor’s short story is that it is important to be morally good but more importantly is that you should not brag of that goodness and expect rewards for that. Let others feel not ‘see’ your goodness. The moral lesson of his story is that goodness is a reward by itself.

The children are so impressed by the bachelor’s story and assert that it is the most interesting story they have ever heard. The aunt, however, is not pleased and criticizes his story for being “most improper” and not suitable for children. She tells him that the story is “A Most improper story to tell to young children. You have undermined the effect of years and careful teaching” (Window 323) The Frame Tale concludes with” for the next six months or so those children will assail her in public with demands for an improper story” (Window 323). The bachelor responds his story is better than her story. He tells her that his story has fascinated the children from the start and keeps them quiet “I kept them quiet for ten minutes, which as more than you were able to do” (Window 323) Though the bachelor is not of the family he is the main character. He is very imaginative and tells a good story in few seconds with many details that captivate the children’s imagination.

## **Conclusion**

The employment of the Frame Tale or the story within a story is one of the characteristics of the post Modern, metafictional novel. This technique is adopted when the main them of the novel is writing novels. Nevertheless, this technique is sometimes adopted by the short story writers when the story is about telling a good short story.

The British short story writer Hector Hugh Munro, known by his pen name Saki, (1870-1916) adopts this technique in some of his short stories that talk about telling stories. In his Frame Tale, “The Open Window”, there are two embedded stories told skilfully by his protagonist, a clever imaginative girl of fifteen called Vera. Her two short stories are interesting because she tells them in an artistic way. They have unconventional setting wit, suspense, humour, mystery and horror and have unexpected end.

In Saki’s other short story “The Story-teller”, there are two storytellers; one is bad and the other is good. The story that the aunt tells to encourage the children to behave well is not well narrated. It is dry and boring because she concentrates on the moral lesson at the expense of the elements that make her story good. Saki here implies that the moral lesson of a short story should be presented interestingly especially if the audience are children.

Contrary to the aunt’s short story, the story told by the bachelor draws the attention of the children at once. It also speaks about a little girl but it contains strong phrases, suspense, more details, wit, horror and unexpected end. This horrible end annoys the aunt who describes the story as “improper” for children. Nevertheless the children like the story and keep insisting on hearing such improper stories for months.



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