

## Critical Essay on "The Interlopers" by Rena Korb

Adam Frost points out in a retrospective essay on Saki's career appearing in *Contemporary Review*, that the author's first published story, "Dogged," ends in a "reversal [that] is typical of Saki"; in that story, the "owner becomes pet and vice versa." Saki would repeat such use of a surprise ending throughout his career as a short story writer, perhaps most famously so in *The Open Window*. While that story's ending brought about a comic effect, in "The Interlopers," which Saki wrote at the end of his career, this pattern is now employed with a more vicious twist: the human hunters become the hunted. This motif is repeated in two different ways. Georg Znaym and Ulrich von Gradwitz are turned into game as each hunts the other, his lifelong enemy. More crucially, however, the men, pinioned under a fallen tree, are about to become the helpless quarry of a pack of wolves. A critic for the *New York Times* points out that "The Interlopers" differs from the other stories in *The Toys of Peace*—as it does, in fact, from the bulk of Saki's short story oeuvre—in its grimness.

Saki places these two men in a setting that underscores their menacing intent. The forest in which the story takes place is primeval and infused with the ominous characteristics of an entity rife for the hunt itself. On this night particularly, there is "movement and unrest among the creatures that were wont to sleep through the dark hours." The woods are dark and cold, and they contain a "disturbing element." Ulrich peers through the "wild tangle of undergrowth" and listens through the "whistling and skirling of the wind and the restless beating of the branches." Ulrich's own actions further intensify this atmosphere, for he has placed "watchers ... in ambush on the crest of the hill."

Saki immediately sets the atmosphere of the hunt with the story's opening sentence. The reader is introduced to Ulrich, who stands "watching and listening, as though for some beast of the wood to come within the range of his vision, and later, of his rifle." The narrative quickly reveals, however, that Ulrich is not hunting a beast but rather, he "patrolled the dark forest in quest of a human enemy." That enemy is Georg Znaym. Georg and Ulrich were born enemies, having inherited from their grandfathers a bitter feud over the very piece of land where Ulrich now stands. Instead of dissipating the feud over the years, "the personal ill-will of the two men" had made it grow; "as boys they had thirsted for one another's blood, [and] as men each prayed that misfortune might fall on the other." Now, each has independently determined to bring about the other's death. To accomplish this goal, each has set out in the forest—knowing that is where his enemy lurks—with a "rifle in his hand . . . hate in his heart and murder uppermost in his mind." In these matching desires, Ulrich and Georg have transformed the other into prey. Thus, each man is at the same time the hunter and the hunted.

Despite actively placing themselves in these roles, the men are aware of the perversity of the situation. When they finally come face to face with each other and with the opportunity "to give full play to the passions of a lifetime," neither can bring himself "to shoot down his neighbour in cold blood and without word spoken." Both men are unable to give themselves up to the wildness of nature. They still respect "the code of a restraining civilization," thus they recognize that murdering another human—in actuality, hunting him down—is unforgivable "except for an offence against his hearth and honour." Ulrich and Georg's mutual indecision renders them unable to take action. They understand that fulfilling their desires would place them in opposition with the rules of society.

Nature, however, is able to act swiftly. A lightning strike makes a beech tree fall down upon them, pinioning them under its branches. The falling of the tree thus places both men in to the role of the helpless. They are cast into the role of "captive plight" of game in a trap. Like the animals they might hunt, no respite is available to them until their men come to release them. Their speech, as well as Saki's narrative, reflects their understanding of this situation. Georg, "savagely," sees Ulrich as "snared" in the forest. Ulrich, for his part, declares that when his men free him, he will kill Georg and tell others that this enemy "met. . . death poaching on my lands." The concept of the hunt—as well as the victory it represents—continually shapes the perceptions of the men, even at a time they no longer are in the position to be hunting any man or any beast.

Surprisingly, while lying trapped under the tree, the two men come to a historic decision: they vow to put their quarrel behind them and instead make peace. In so doing, they harness the better part of their human nature. Their settlement stands in marked contrast to all of their past enmity and hatred, which required that they suppress their humanity and instead act upon their baser animal nature. The men's language demonstrates their acknowledgment that they are entering this new phase. Ulrich refers to their past behavior as the behavior of a "devil" rather than the behavior of a hunter; he also suggests that they now take on the role of "friend." Georg

speaks of coming to visit Ulrich on his land and “never fir[ing] a shot . . . save when you invited me as a guest.” Ulrich and Georg determine to embrace their human ability to reason and to forgive.

The men are eager to get free of their plight, and both are also eager “that his men might be the first to arrive, so that he might be the first to show honourable attention to the enemy that had become a friend.” By adding this detail to the narrative, Saki shows that, despite their interest in making peace and giving up the hunt, the men still desire to have victory over the other. Thus, they have not completely given up any notion of competition, they have simply channeled it into a more acceptable, less harmful form. To expedite their release, the men decide to call out for their foresters, and they raise their voices in unison “in a prolonged hunting call.” As their luck would have it, instead of beckoning their foresters, their calls alert a pack of wolves, which begins to advance toward the captive men. The wolves follow Ulrich’s path “down the hillside.” By mimicking the earlier movement of Ulrich as well as the movement of the foresters, the wolves manifest the similarity between man and beast; as the men were earlier hunting each other, now the wolves are hunting the men.

Alexander Malcolm Forbes writes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, “[I]n an approximation to parable that is rare for Munro, ‘The Interlopers’ becomes one of his most idealistic and paradoxically pessimistic stories.” Indeed, the story imparts multiple lessons about the benefits of peace as well as the folly of humankind placing itself above the laws of nature. The story implicitly explains why such a cruel fate befalls these enemies: they have dared to intrude, or interlope, on the domains of the forest. In the ongoing feud over possession of this strip of land, both the Gradwitz and Znaeym families have attempted to assert authority where they have no right to do so. Only contrived legal mechanisms gave the von Gradwitz family the forest. In hunting the land and asserting it belongs to them, the men tried to tame the area, but their claim on the land derives only from the authority of civilized society, not from any real sense of belonging or unity. However, the forest is truly primeval; it is a place of survival of the fittest. When the men return to the forest with the deliberate goal of hunting down and killing their enemy, Ulrich and Georg forsake the protection afforded each by the codes of civilization. Their actions also help return the forest to its rightful occupants: beasts on the hunt. They are unable to fulfill this role, but the wolf pack is able to do so.

Before the two men make their peace, Georg announces, “We fight this quarrel out to the death, you and I and our foresters, with no cursed interlopers to come between us.” In this declaration, to which Ulrich accedes, Georg demonstrates one crucial error: he believes the interlopers are the representatives of the legal institutions that have come between him and the land. In reality, the interlopers are he and Ulrich, who have attempted to usurp this wild territory. At the end of the story, the wolves assert the primacy of beast over human within the land they can claim as their own. Their impending destruction of Georg and Ulrich show that the animals who hunt in the forest, not the men who hunt there, are in control.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on “The Interlopers,” in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

### **Critical Essay on “The Interlopers by Douglas Dupler**

Saki was a master of the literary device. Devices are subtle “tricks” that authors employ to make stories interesting, to move plots along, and to keep readers absorbed. The short story form, with its need to entice readers quickly from beginning to end, lends itself well to the use of literary device. Unlikely events, suddenly twisting plots, and trick endings are devices that allow short stories to pack excitement in small spaces. Saki's story “The Interlopers” has several prime examples of the literary trick in action; in fact, the story relies on literary device for its effectiveness. However, despite the efficiency and excitement in his storytelling, Saki's reliance on literary trickery in “The Interlopers” ultimately detracts from the depth of the story and keeps the story from being a truly great work of literature.

The beginning of “The Interlopers” is normal enough, but then again, every trickster needs a straight act to set up the audience. The story commences by providing a setting with realistic detail, describing a forest “somewhere on the eastern spurs of the Carpathians . . . one winter night.” The forest also has a particular mood. There are animals “running like driven things,” and on this “wind-scourged winter night” there is a “disturbing element” and “movement and unrest among the creatures.” Despite being placed in a far-off time and place,

which hints that it might be a fable or tale, the story begs to be taken seriously because of the precise details and serious tone of the setting.

In addition to the scenery, a man is present, and realistic details form his character. His name, Ulrich von Gradwitz, connotes the foreign, while other clues imply he is of aristocratic, central European stock. However, Ulrich is not an average sportsman; he “patrolled the dark forest in quest of a human enemy.” Closing the first paragraph with this line, Saki uses foreboding to temper the realism of the setting, to let the reader gently know that something strange might be starting to happen. Continuing with realistic detail, the next paragraphs present a deeper explanation of the characters and setting, and introduce the conflict of the story, the enmity between two longtime rivals.

After the story is set up, the first device, or trick, of the plot quickly takes place at the end of the third paragraph. Just at the time when meeting Georg Znaeym “man to man” was “uppermost in his thoughts,” Ulrich steps around a large tree and sees his enemy face-to-face. At first, given the situation, this might not seem too out of the ordinary—two rivals meeting each other on a dark night in a disputed forest. However, from the beginning of the story, the reader is informed that these two men have “thirsted for one another's blood” since they have been boys, and that they have “each prayed that misfortune might fall on the other.” Furthermore, the reader has been told that this rivalry spans all the way back to the characters’ grandfathers. There has been plenty of time for these two men to act out their aggressions. Of all the times when this story could have taken place, it just so happens that it takes place on the one night the two enemies meet. Thus the first trick: something happening in a story that is unlikely or out of the ordinary in real life, coming as a surprise to all involved.

The tricky plot twists do not stop there. Just when the “chance had come to give full play to the passions of a lifetime” for the main characters, “a deed of Nature's own violence” stops the two enemies right in their tracks. The second major plot twist occurs as a falling tree branch thunders down. This crashing branch lands perfectly enough to trap both men without seriously injuring either of them, leaving them face to face but immobile and helpless. It is an exciting moment for the reader, and a clever step in an unfolding drama between two people with conflict. However, if the first plot twist, of two longtime enemies meeting in the flesh after a lifetime of rivalry, is questionable, this second literary trick might be nearly unbelievable. Surprisingly, though, the reader does not react with disbelief, because the situation has become too interesting to cause the reader to slow down or to think over the likelihood of events. An intense conflict has finally come out in the open, begging to be resolved. This is the beauty of a well-used literary device; the reader, so absorbed in the story, stops demanding strict reality and flows along with the plot.

It is at this point that a potent story begins, the story of two people finally being granted what they most desire, the chance to confront a mortal enemy. The characters’ first reactions are typical; they insult and threaten one another. The accident brings “a strange medley of pious thank-offerings and sharp curses.” Each man fantasizes about the near future when his own version of justice will be served to the other, but both men are helpless. The reader stays absorbed because the outcome remains curious and undecided.

Thus, the story has moved from a tale of possibly violent revenge to a situation with more human dimensions: both men are vulnerable. Ulrich sees the pain of Georg and offers him his wine flask in a gesture of kindness. The story deepens as it begins to address human frailty and a challenging moral puzzle. However, this is also the place in the story that Saki’s style and technique, of brevity and tricky plot twists, fail to provide the depth that could make the story truly empathetic and multi-faceted.

For example, Ulrich goes from anger and hatred of his rival to compassion in hardly any time at all. At one moment he is threatening Georg with the worst, and the next moment he is offering his wine flask in peace. He has a major change of heart with hardly any intervening thoughts, except musing on how cold it is, how difficult it is to open his wine flask, and how good the wine tastes. The reader hears his forgiving words but has no idea how and why this change has occurred so quickly and definitively. Saki does not spend any time examining Ulrich's motives and internal thoughts because of his style of moving the story along quickly. Humor even enters into the story at this serious moment; when Ulrich asks Georg for his friendship, he comments on the “stupid strip of forest, where the trees can’t even stand upright in a breach of wind.” The situation, in keeping with Saki's style, remains entertaining and lighthearted.

Very rapidly and in order, Georg also has a change of heart without much explanation. After a period of silence, conveyed by one quick line, Georg agrees to forgiveness and a new attitude. Compared to his fuming

rage just a few minutes earlier, this character is now envisioning a completely new life with a new friend. A lifetime has been changed in “this last half-hour.”

The dialogue and thoughts of the two characters, as they understand the situation and forgive each other, are important and critical parts of the story. At their best, though, these characterizations come across as superficial and impersonal. Ulrich has a change of heart without any real explanation, as does Georg. The conversation they share is plain, given the circumstances, and the two men, with their unremarkable dialogue, become practically interchangeable. In fact, it would be difficult to pick out which lines belong to which character if they were not labeled, because the two men speak so similarly and topically.

Saki’s narration indicates that this moment of forgiveness in the story is crucial, when the storyteller writes that “both men were silent, turning over in their minds the wonderful changes that this dramatic reconciliation would bring about.” However, letting the reader in on these “wonderful changes” would take longer and deeper narration than Saki gives, and the reconciliation is thus not that dramatic. The two characters remain shadowy, as the focus shifts to the possibility of other “men” entering the story to save them. In great stories, characters are portrayed as unique individuals with personalities, problems, and backgrounds of their own. Furthermore, in great stories, the changes that characters undergo often provide hints of deeper or more general truths for the reader. Using these measures of greatness, Saki’s story comes up short. In his zest for brevity and momentum, the author misses the chance to deepen the situation and to more fully develop the characters.

At the end of “The Interlopers,” it is up to the reader to decide what exactly has happened. Of course, it is a trick ending. The paragraphs toward the end lead the reader into believing that helpers are coming to assist the two fallen men. But in one quick line the story takes a completely different meaning: “Wolves!” Just when the reader has gained some empathy and trust of the characters, the author does them in with a macabre plot twist.

With this ending, the story becomes an ambiguous morality tale. Because both men have lived lives full of hatred and dreams of revenge, they are now doomed because they have learned to forgive too late. Other “interlopers” of fate have surprisingly intervened. At the same time, a more optimistic reading of the ending could be made. Perhaps the two men, being full of compassion and forgiveness at their end, find peace in the face of death. The author leaves no clues, being intent on keeping the plot twisting, the story surprising, and on not demanding too much of the reader’s time or energy. Ultimately, in his flashy use of literary device, Saki leaves it up to the reader to determine the final meaning of the story, that of redemption or punishment. The story is witty, readable, and full of momentum to the very end. However, “The Interlopers” speeds past the chance to provide deeper insight into the lives of two characters and their human dilemma.

Source: Douglas Dupler, Critical Essay on “The Interlopers,” in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.