

The Lumber Room: Ideal artifact for prose analysis + an epistle on child rearing

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Abstract: *The Lumber Room* by Saki has undergone multiple analyses as a short story. This study firstly examines its socio-pedagogic suitability for a target population of fifteen year old students who are embarking on the path of appreciating literature in Sri Lanka as the short story is contained in their anthology. It is rich in analytical excellence. The tightness of plot, multiple themes, dramatic dialogue, economy and dexterity in the use of language make it an ideal artifact for analysis of the short story genre. There is an omnipresence of humour, especially satire and wit. Secondly this study utilizes the short story as an analytical cameo on development psychology of a child and adult-child relationships. Its autobiographical nuances enhance the realistic value in this context. At present within the institution of family in the Sri Lankan society a transition from the traditional extended family structure to an accelerated creation of nuclear families is witnessed. The short story generates awareness on the need in a child for strong emotional attachments with positive reinforcement from care givers who unlike in the past very often is restricted to the two parents at present. Additionally it affirms the right of children to engage in and experience creativity. Thus the thematic multiplicity of the short story targets a reader population of children who are given an occasion to evaluate the relationship they have with their own parents.

Index Terms: Appreciating literature, fifteen year old students, *The Lumber Room*, child rearing, adult-child relationships, Development psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the author: H. H. Munro

The British author Hector Hugh Munro (1870 - 1916) published under the pen name Saki. Munro was born in Burma (Myanmar) in 1870. His father was an inspector general of the Burma police. His mother died in 1872 when Munro was only two years old. After her death he with his two older siblings a brother and sister were sent to England. Their childhood in England was not happy as their two maiden aunts, Charlotte and Augusta, were very strict disciplinarians who resorted not only to physical punishment but also cruelty which resulted in psychological trauma. Religion too played a strong role in the household. A fear of God and individual self-discipline was to be instilled in the children at a young age. Munro's sister, E.M. Munro, who wrote the *Biography of Saki* (1924)^[1] states:

'One of Munro's aunts, Augusta, was a woman of ungovernable temper, of fierce likes and dislikes, imperious, a moral coward, possessing no brains worth speaking of, and a primitive disposition.'

Ethel Munro further states that the aunts 'imposed a regime of seclusion, restraint, and arbitrary rules enforced in the case of Charlie [Saki's brother] by corporal punishment and in the case of Hector [Saki] and Ethel by coldness, removal of privileges, and guilt'(cited in Byrne, 2007, 17)^[2]. According to Saki's sister their aunts and grandmother 'tried to instill the fear of God into their charges'. Thus it could be stated that *The Lumber Room* is a near-autobiographical depiction of Munro's unhappy childhood experiences under his guardians. The Aunt in the short story is not entirely fictional. She had a real life equal in one of Munro's aunts: Augusta making the background of author an important facet the short story.

1.2 Social aptness to the Sri Lankan student population

Globalization, westernization and socioeconomic factors have led to endorsement of nucleation of the majority of family units especially in urban Sri Lanka. Furthermore the Sri Lankan society is, at its core, still patriarchal. The role of the mother as the primary caregiver is still unchanged. But at micro-economic level most family units in our society at present have moved away from a single wage earner entity. Thus difficulties of child rearing arise due to the need for employment of the primary caregiver. The balancing of a professional life along with the responsibilities of a home maker while providing quality time to a child levies a heavy psychological tax on the working mother. Thus with the diminishing status of the extended family child rearing is a delicate process and is a challenging responsibility. Sociologically the behavior patterns and beliefs of parents are guided by general cultural norms and value systems of a society. Being obedient is recognized to be a good trait in a parent-child relationship in most Asian societies. Thus one main cultural expectation from a child in Sri Lanka is obedience and respect towards parents and adults in general. This obedience when flouted tends to result in punishment. Nicholas in the short story *The Lumber Room* is a whimsical child with a great sense of humour who rebels against punitive punishment in a creative and innovative manner annoying and provoking the Aunt who is his caregiver. This questions her child rearing style which is authoritarian. Furthermore in most societies a child very often is forced to fulfil parental beliefs in diverse aspects of socialization including rigidity in the instilling of moral values. If an instiller of moral values, such as the Aunt in the short story, violates what they preach it confuses a child's grasp of the difference between right and wrong.

Another main value of the short story is that it requests the attention of parents to one, very often neglected, aspect of child rearing: the need to experience creativity. According to a key recommendation of the National Child Protection Policy