

Living Framing Fiction as Reality: Psychological Manipulation and Social Critique in Saki's *The Open Window* (1914)

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ABSTRACT

The Open Window by Saki (1914) is a short story featuring a young girl named Vera who takes advantage of the mental condition of a man, Framton Nuttel, to convey a false but very convincing story. This study analyzes how manipulation is constructed through the characters, dialogue, and atmosphere in the story. This manipulation occurs gradually and slowly, beginning with the fictional story created by Vera, followed by Frampton's excessive emotional reactions, and finally his hasty escape from the house. The analysis of the story's intrinsic elements is conducted using a qualitative method with thematic and psychological approaches, focusing on how Vera focuses on how Vera constructs a psychological manipulation, the role of perception and reality, and the use of dark humor. The analysis examines how a simple interaction can escalate into something that creates psychological tension. The results of the analysis show that Vera's manipulation not only causes emotional confusion in an individual but also demonstrates how vulnerable individuals are easily swayed by plausible stories. The dark humor in this story serves not only as entertainment but also as a critique of social norms that allow lies to be used to avoid emotional openness. This story highlights how fictional power shapes perception and subtly conveys social criticism. The strength of this story lies in the simplicity of the unfolding scenes, which still manage to leave a strong psychological impact on both the characters and the readers.

Keywords: dark humor, distortion of reality, perception, psychological manipulation, social criticism

ABSTRAK

The Open Window karya Saki (1914) merupakan sebuah cerita pendek, menampilkan kisah seorang gadis muda bernama Vera yang memanfaatkan kondisi mental seorang pria, Framton Nuttel, untuk menyampaikan cerita palsu tetapi terdengar sangat meyakinkan. Penelitian ini menganalisis tentang bagaimana manipulasi dapat dibangun melalui karakter, percakapan, dan suasana dalam cerita yang mendukung. Manipulasi ini terjadi secara bertahap dan perlahan, dimulai dari cerita fiktif yang dibuat Vera hingga reaksi emosional berlebihan dari Frampton dan akhirnya melarikan diri dengan tergesa-gesa dari rumah tersebut. Kajian terhadap unsur-unsur intrinsik dalam cerita ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui pendekatan tematik dan psikologis, dengan fokus

pada bagaimana Vera membangun manipulasi psikologis, peran persepsi dan realitas, serta penggunaan humor gelap. Analisis ini menelaah bagaimana sebuah interaksi sederhana dapat berkembang menjadi sesuatu yang menimbulkan ketegangan psikologis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa manipulasi yang dibuat oleh Vera tidak hanya mengakibatkan kebingungan emosional terhadap suatu individu, tetapi juga memperlihatkan bagaimana kondisi individu yang rentan sangat mudah untuk percaya terhadap cerita yang terdengar masuk akal. Humor gelap pada cerita ini tidak hanya menjadi unsur hiburan, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai kritik terhadap norma sosial yang membiarkan kebohongan digunakan untuk menghindari keterbukaan emosional. Cerita ini menyoroti bagaimana kekuatan fiktif dalam membentuk persepsi dan menyampaikan kritik sosial secara halus. Kekuatan cerita ini terletak pada kesederhanaan adegan yang berkembang dan tetap mampu meninggalkan dampak psikologis yang kuat pada tokoh maupun pembaca.

Kata kunci: humor gelap, disortasi realitas, persepsi, manipulasi psikologi, kritik sosial

INTRODUCTION

Psychological manipulation is a common phenomenon found in both real life and literary works. It generally refers to the process of influencing an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a deceptive or harmful way, often through tactics such as lying, distorting information, and emotional exploitation (Braiker, 2004; Simon, 2010). These forms of manipulation can have significant psychological consequences, particularly for vulnerable individuals, as discussed in studies on emotional abuse and manipulative behavior. Furthermore, psychological manipulation is closely related to the concepts of perception and reality, as it can distort an individual's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. In literary contexts, this phenomenon is frequently explored to reflect complex human interactions and social dynamics.

One notable example is found in Saki's short story *The Open Window* (1914), which presents themes related to psychological and social conditions. The element of psychological manipulation is clearly illustrated through the character of Vera, who fabricates a story and convinces Mr. Nuttel of its truth, ultimately triggering an excessive emotional reaction. In addition to manipulation, the story highlights the conflict between perception and reality, demonstrating how easily individuals can accept information without verification. Thus, *The Open Window* (1914) not only delivers dark humor but also

provides a critical reflection on trust, deception, and the human tendency to construct meaning based on limited information.

The relevance of this study lies in its connection to contemporary social conditions, where individuals are increasingly exposed to manipulative or misleading information. Phenomena such as hoaxes, disinformation in digital media, and gaslighting in interpersonal relationships illustrate how narratives can shape false perceptions and influence behavior. These conditions make the analysis of psychological manipulation in literary works particularly significant, as literature can offer insight into how such mechanisms operate in both fictional and real-world contexts.

Previous studies on *The Open Window* (1914) have approached the story from linguistic, pragmatic, and psychological perspectives. Maeedi and Jasim (2021), in their study entitled "*Investigating Linguistic Strategies of Persuasion in The Open Window by Saki with Specific Reference to Johnstone's Model: A Stylistic Study*," focus on stylistic analysis using Johnstone's model of persuasion. Their study emphasizes how language constructs narrative tension and persuasive effects. Similarly, Al Rubaye and Al Mashhadani (2024) investigate linguistic strategies of persuasion and highlight how Vera's narrative structure and lexical choices successfully convince both Framton and the readers to accept a false version of reality. In addition, Eragamreddy (2024) analyzes deception and miscommunication through the violation of Grice's conversational maxims,

showing how Vera's lies appear natural and believable within the conversation. Meanwhile, Mohan (2022) examines the psychological condition of Framton, arguing that his anxiety and vulnerable mindset make him easily influenced by others' narratives. Although these studies provide important insights into persuasion, deception, and psychological vulnerability in the story, they primarily focus on linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms. Therefore, this study fills the gap by examining psychological manipulation not only as a communicative strategy but also as a mechanism that shapes perception, emotional response, and social meaning.

This study aims to analyze how psychological manipulation is constructed through the character of Vera, examine the role of perception and reality in shaping the narrative, and explore the function of dark humor as a form of social criticism in *The Open Window* (1914). Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to literary studies by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between manipulation, the construction of reality, and social criticism in modern classic literature.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative research design using thematic and psychological approaches, as the analysis focuses on meaning, interpretation, and narrative structure rather than quantifiable data. The primary data source is Saki's short story *The Open Window* (1914), from which relevant textual elements are systematically selected through close reading. In this regard, the data selection process specifically targets Vera's dialogues, key narrative events, character interactions, and descriptive passages that contribute to the construction of psychological manipulation, the conflict between perception and reality, and the use of dark humor. More specifically, these elements are chosen because they represent the central mechanisms through which the narrative develops tension and shapes both character response and reader interpretation. Therefore, by concentrating on these significant

components, the study ensures that the analysis remains focused, contextually grounded, and directly aligned with the research objectives established in the preceding section.

Furthermore, following the data selection process, the analysis is conducted through several interconnected stages to ensure systematic interpretation. First, data coding is carried out by categorizing the selected excerpts into three main analytical themes, namely psychological manipulation, perception–reality conflict, and dark humor. In doing so, each excerpt is examined based on its narrative function and subsequently labeled to reveal patterns and relationships within the text. Next, a thematic analysis is applied in order to identify recurring structures, narrative strategies, and thematic connections that emerge from the coded data. Through this step, the analysis gradually moves from individual textual evidence toward a more comprehensive understanding of the story's underlying meanings. Finally, the interpretation stage links these findings to relevant theoretical frameworks, such as theories of psychological manipulation, narrative transportation, and humor; thus, situating the analysis within a broader academic context. Consequently, through this structured and continuous process, the study not only explains how meaning is constructed within the narrative but also demonstrates how these elements collectively contribute to the story's psychological depth and its function as social criticism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that Saki's *The Open Window* (1914) is not merely a brief anecdote of deception but a complex narrative that intertwines psychological manipulation, distorted perception, and humor as tools of critique. The findings emphasize that Vera's role as a storyteller is central to the development of events, as her fabricated tale successfully reconstructs Framton Nuttel's reality and drives the story toward its ironic climax. Through an examination of the intersection of setting, narration, and character, three thematic axes are the most

prominent areas of attention: dark humor applied as social satire, psychological manipulation as a stylistic tool, and the tension between appearance and reality generated by unreliability in narration. These key planes highlight how Saki represents fiction as fact to uncover human frailty and the fragility of social custom.

1. Psychological Manipulation as a Narrative Strategy

At the heart of *The Open Window* (Saki, 1914) lies Vera's deliberate use of psychological manipulation as a narrative device. Vera, as early as the start, is characterized as "*a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen*" (Saki, 1914, p. 1). Such early characterization is crucial as it establishes her as an authority figure in the home despite her youth. Her composure and confidence allow her to dominate the meeting with Framton Nuttel, who is, on the contrary, portrayed as socially apprehensive, nervy, and easily flustered. By putting Vera in control of the social interaction, Saki creates the conditions on which her manipulation can be acted out successfully. The construction of Vera's fabricated tale of the hunters who "*went out one morning three years ago to shoot and never came back*" (Saki, 1914, p. 2) is a tactical exploitation of Framton's psychological vulnerability. Vera carefully plots her story to cater to the inclinations of her audience. Knowing Framton is already nervous and unfamiliar with the household, she maximizes the suspense by emphasizing absence, disappearance, and uncertainty. The open window, that ordinary domestic fixture, is recontextualized as a laden sign of perpetual mourning and unresolved tragedy. Through this symbolic reinvention, Vera not only convinces Framton of the validity of her story but also ensures that he will filter every sensory cue—the silence, the open air, and finally the apparition of the hunters' return—through the lens of horror.

The key to Vera's success as a manipulator lies in her narrative technique: dramatic language, detailed specificity, and strategic pauses are all used to prompt affective response. This is in line with Green

and Brock's Transportation-Imagery Model (2000), which argues that readers or listeners who are "transported" into a fictional universe will be more likely to accept story-consistent assumptions as true. Framton's "horror-stricken" response to the denouement (Saki, 1914, p. 3) demonstrates this impact. He does not critically evaluate the hunters' return but is overcome by his affective and sensual response to Vera's story, which replaces logical judgment and provokes his panicked flight.

Interestingly, Vera's manipulation is not a child's game but a calculated use of narrative manipulation. In this, she is comparable to Shakespeare's Iago in *Othello*, who calculates and exploits others' psychological weaknesses for his amusement or gain (Haque & Roy, 2018). Both figures show how manipulation is most effective when it exploits the inner vulnerabilities of its victim, transforming private anxiety into public action. By placing Vera—an seemingly harmless teenager—in this manipulative role, Saki emphasizes the unsettling fact that narrative control is not bound by age or authority; rather, it is based on psychological insight and rhetorical skill.

The impact of Vera's manipulation is not confined to the fictional world of the short story. The same methods are employed in contemporary scenarios, particularly in the spread of disinformation on social media. Pennycook and Rand (2019) demonstrate that emotionally framed narratives are far more persuasive and more transmitted than objective facts, pointing out the identical weaknesses that Saki dramatizes in Framton's reaction. Vera's psychological manipulation, hence, is not just a narrative mechanism but also a remark on universal human susceptibility to emotionally framed stories. By emphasizing this motif, Saki satirizes not just the credulity of a single character but the vulnerability of human perception to convincing narrative.

2. Perception and Reality

In *The Open Window* (1914), the conflict between perception and reality stands at the heart of Framton Nuttel's experience. As

a nervous visitor seeking rest, he instead becomes trapped in Vera's fabricated tale. Her story about her uncle and two brothers who never returned from a hunting trip turns the open window, an ordinary feature of the house, into a symbol of grief and loss in Framton's eyes (Saki, 1914, p. 2). The climax unfolds when the hunters, presumed dead, calmly return home: *"In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window... a tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels"* (Saki, 1914, p. 4). Instead of recognizing Vera's deception, Framton interprets their arrival as something supernatural and flees in panic. This reaction shows how a distorted perception, once internalized, can overpower actual reality and lead to irrational behavior.

Vera's manipulation demonstrates the persuasive power of narrative consistency and emotional appeal. Deprived of external sources of verification, Nuttel accepts her story at face value. As Ecker and Lewandowsky (2020) argue, emotionally charged narratives are often more effective than neutral factual assertions in shaping belief, which explains the credibility of Vera's fabrication. Nuttel's failure to distinguish fact from fiction thus reflects a broader human tendency to accept coherent but misleading accounts as truth. This tendency suggests that individuals may construct their understanding of reality around emotionally convincing interpretations rather than factual accuracy. As Nareswari et al. (2026) argue, psychological meaning is often reconstructed through emotional truths even when factual continuity is disrupted.

As emphasized by Eragamreddy (2024), the deception in Saki's story functions not merely as comic relief but as a literary device to expose human vulnerability in the face of unverifiable information. By destabilizing the boundary between perception and reality, Saki creates dark humor while simultaneously critiquing the uncritical acceptance of narrative authority. Framton's susceptibility resonates with contemporary

issues of misinformation, where narratives framed with emotional intensity often gain traction over empirically grounded facts.

Accordingly, the theme of perception and reality in *The Open Window* (1914) extends beyond its comic surface. It foregrounds Saki's broader critique of fragile human judgment and underscores the necessity of critical reflection when confronted with persuasive but deceptive storytelling.

3. Analysis of Dark Humor and Social Criticism

In *The Open Window* (1914), Saki uses dark humor through the tragic irony between what Framton Nuttel believes and what actually happened. This humor is not simply for entertainment purposes, but serves as a means of social criticism. It exposes the trusting nature of individuals who are easily deceived by false stories. The dark humor is carefully constructed through Vera's trickery, the absurdity of the social situation, and the climactic moment when the truth is finally revealed. From a humor theory perspective, this story integrates several approaches.

The incongruence theory explains the reader's laughter as the result of an unexpected collision between the serious atmosphere and Framton's panic. Superiority theory applies when the reader realizes Vera's deception while Framton remains unaware of it. Meanwhile, relief theories on Framton's psychological dynamics when Vera makes up a false story that disturbs the psychology of Framton, who runs away in fear, causing laughter from readers. In this case, the laughter arises from the knowledge gap: the reader knows Vera's lie, while the victim interprets it as reality. A key moment occurs when Vera states, *"They went out to shoot three years ago and never came back"* (Saki, 1914, page 2). Through incongruence theory, this line generates dark humor by colliding fabricated tragedy with the temporal reality of a routine visit. Through superiority theory, the reader's blind acceptance is foolish. Through

relief theory, the grief-laden tension Vera constructs through this line is what ultimately discharges as laughter once the deception is revealed.

This fabricated story creates an atmosphere of grief, further reinforced by Vera's detail that *The Open Window* (1914) symbolized her aunt's endless waiting – a story that was entirely false. When the men finally returned home, Framton – already influenced by Vera's story – interpreted their arrival as a ghostly apparition and fled in terror. According to Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), humor arises when social repression and inner fears are released through irony. Vera's story creates psychological tension that culminates when the deception is revealed. This is in line with Critchley's (2002) view that humor is a "form of resistance" to rigid social structures, suggesting that humor allows individuals to laugh at the absurdity of society. The significance of this analysis lies in the recognition that dark humor is not just a narrative technique, but also a form of social criticism. Theoretically, dark humor in literature has a dual function: it reveals social reality while providing psychological release for the reader.

As such, the dark humor in *The Open Window* (1914) expands our understanding of the role of satirical narrative. Through a combination of irony, absurdity, and implicit criticism, Saki shows that humor can serve as a reflective medium to expose human weaknesses and social discomfort. Even today, dark humor remains an effective strategy to deliver social criticism in a subtle, entertaining, yet sharp manner. The dark humor in this story is not only entertaining but also reflects human vulnerability when dealing with the absurdity of life.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed Saki's *The Open Window* (1914) by focusing on three key aspects: psychological manipulation, the conflict between perception and reality, and the use of dark humor as social criticism. Vera's manipulation of Framton Nuttel shows how the unreliability of the narrator warps

reality, preys upon human weakness, and builds in the narrative a tension which fascinates the readers even while it repels them. The confrontation of fact and falsehood points up the weakness of human judgment in the face of plausible yet dishonest stories.

The value of this research is emphasized by the fact that it can be applied in contemporary scenarios in which disinformation, fake news, and misinformation continue to shape public perception. For the readership, the story serves as a reminder to remain skeptical about tales appearing credible yet devoid of proof. At the same time, it shows how humor particularly one of the darker kind can also serve as a powerful literary device for critiquing societal ills while offering mental solace.

In conclusion, *The Open Window* (1914) is more than a tale of deception but an ageless commentary upon human gullibility, the power of narrative in the production of reality, and the subtle work of literature in the provision of social commentary. The work underlines the importance of the reading of literature not merely for pleasure but as a source for the production of awareness, the development of a critical faculty, and a preservative against manipulation in the individual and social world.

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