Gabriel-Ernest

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAKI

The son of a British colonial Inspector General, Hector Hugh Munro, better known by his pen name Saki (some of his writing was also published under the name H. H. Munro), was born in British-controlled Burma in 1870. Following in his father's footsteps, Saki also joined the colonial police in Burma, but was forced to return to England permanently due to illness. After working as a foreign correspondent for the *Morning Post* in Eastern Europe, Saki found success as a writer of short stories, publishing several collections including *Reginald in Russia*, *The Chronicles of Clovis*, and *Beasts and Super-Beasts*, as well as multiple novels. Saki is believed to have been gay, having never married, but was forced to keep that part of himself hidden due to the criminalization and ostracization of homosexuality in Edwardian England. Saki enlisted to fight in World War I, and was killed in France in 1916.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Edwardian era, which lasted from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to the beginning of World War I in 1914, was a time of great prosperity and technological advancement in British society. While the British Empire was at its height and few could imagine the coming destruction of the world wars and how it would affect Britain's place in the world, writers of the Edwardian era began to take a more skeptical look at their society and its beliefs. Despite the general turn toward criticizing the ideals of the previous Victorian era, Edwardian literature was very stylistically diverse. Through exposing, mocking, or criticizing social structures of bias, discrimination, and oppression, writers like Saki encouraged their society to confront its darker side, as well as tackling the growing sense of anxiety many felt because of the rapid historical changes they were experiencing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Saki was greatly influenced by leading late-Victorian and Edwardian writers before him, Oscar Wilde in particular. Wilde's satires, such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, shine a similarly sarcastic light on the hypocritical power structures of Edwardian society. Likewise, Wilde's gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* shares Saki's concern for depicting social criticism through fantasy. Other related authors of the time include Lewis Carroll and Rudyard Kipling, who also used the short story form to explore both society and the supernatural. Saki himself was an inspiration for later British writers, including P.G. Wodehouse. His work is also comparable to other masters of the satirical short story from different contexts, such as the American writer Dorothy Parker.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gabriel-Ernest
- **When Written:** London
- **Where Written:** 1908–1909
- **When Published:** 1909
- **Literary Period:** Edwardian Era
- **Genre:** Short Story, Comic Horror, Social Satire
- **Setting:** Rural England
- **Climax:** Van Cheele realizes that Gabriel-Ernest is a werewolf and attempts to reach him before sunset.
- **Antagonist:** Gabriel-Ernest
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Acrimonious Aunts. On a visit to England in 1872, Saki's mother, Mary, was charged by a cow. She subsequently miscarried, dying of complications, leading Saki's father to send his children back to England to be raised by their strict, tyrannical aunts. Many of Saki's characters were modeled after these aunts, who are typically portrayed sarcastically and unfavorably.

Russian Research. Saki also published a serious work of history, *The Rise of the Russian Empire*, in 1900. Highly interested in and knowledgeable about Eastern Europe, his work for the *Morning Post* took him to the Balkans and Saint Petersburg, where he personally witnessed the failed 1905 Russian Revolution, before returning to London by way of Paris.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Gabriel-Ernest" is set in the English countryside, in and around the woods belonging to local landowner and justice of the peace Van Cheele. Van Cheele's friend Cunningham's visit is concluding, and on the way to the train station he tells Van Cheele that there is a "**wild beast**" in his woods. Van Cheele is concerned with the state of his woods, but only a superficial level, and dismisses Cunningham's cryptic statement without much thought. On his walk through the woods that afternoon, however, he discovers a naked 16-year-old boy who claims to

be living there, hunting for "flesh" at **night**, including "child-flesh." The boy disappears into the woods, leaving Van Cheele disturbed.

Van Cheele remembers that local game, livestock, and even the miller's child recently went missing, but dismisses any connection to what he hopes was only the boy's twisted joke. He is also concerned for his own reputation, which could be damaged if it becomes known that there is a strange boy in his woods. Returning home for dinner with his aunt, Van Cheele is unusually quiet. The next morning, he resolves to go visit Cunningham and find out what he meant about a wild beast. Before he can do so, however, the boy appears in his own home. Caught off guard, Van Cheele tells his aunt that the boy has lost his memory. She insists on taking care of him, naming him Gabriel-Ernest, and setting him to work helping her teach her Sunday school class.

Van Cheele travels to see Cunningham, who tells him what he saw: at sunset, a boy, presumably Gabriel-Ernest, was standing naked on the hillside. The moment the sun set, however, he was replaced by a wolf. Van Cheele hurries home as fast as he can. When he arrives, he learns that his aunt sent Gabriel-Ernest to take the Toop child home. Running after them, Van Cheele fails to get there before dark, hearing a scream as the sun sets. Only Gabriel-Ernest's clothes are found, leading some, including Van Cheele's aunt, to believe that the child fell into the mill-race and Gabriel-Ernest jumped in to save it, drowning in the process. Miss Van Cheele puts up a memorial to Gabriel-Ernest in their church, but Van Cheele refuses to support the memorial or believe this version of events.

CHARACTERS

Van Cheele – Van Cheele, the protagonist of "Gabriel-Ernest," is a landowner, parish councillor, and justice of the peace who lives with his aunt in a large Victorian home. A self-styled naturalist, Van Cheele has a great but superficial love for nature. He keeps a stuffed bittern on display in his study and takes frequent observational strolls through his woods, not so much to understand nature "as to provide topics for conversation afterwards." When his friend Cunningham warns him of the "**wild beast**" in his woods, he is dismissive at first. As the truth about Gabriel-Ernest becomes clear—that, at **sunset**, he turns into a werewolf—Van Cheele attempts to stop him from eating any more children. His motivation, however, is self-interested, as he is driven by fear both for his reputation and personal safety; he is also driven by a powerful fear of the unknown. While Van Cheele is unable to save the Toop child from Gabriel-Ernest, he does stand up for what he believes to be the truth, refusing to support his aunt's Gabriel-Ernest memorial, indicating that the events of the story have shaken him out of his complacent and easy old life.

Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy) – Gabriel-Ernest is a mysterious, wild boy living in Van Cheele's woods, who may or may not be a **werewolf**. Gabriel-Ernest tells Van Cheele that he hunts for "flesh" at **night**, including game and livestock, as well as "child-flesh." Bold and arrogant, he sneaks into Van Cheele's house the next morning and catches him off guard. Flustered and forced to come up with a story on the spot, Van Cheele tells his aunt that the boy has lost his memory, whereupon she insists on taking him in and gives him his name, "Gabriel-Ernest." The evidence for Gabriel-Ernest's lycanthropy is vague, though Gabriel-Ernest's cryptic comments do line up with Cunningham's claim to have watched him transform. Also, many animals and a child did go missing during the period in which Gabriel-Ernest claims to have been hunting. Ultimately, little is clear about Gabriel-Ernest himself, leading the other characters to project their hopes and fears onto this strange, naked boy—or werewolf.

Cunningham – Cunningham is an artist and friend of Van Cheele's. After visiting Van Cheele he claims to have seen a "**wild beast**" in the woods. Unlike the talkative Van Cheele, Cunningham is a man of relatively few words. As his choice of career would indicate, he is more given to understanding the world and expressing himself visually. This, along with his mother's death from "brain trouble," leads to some hesitation on his part about telling Van Cheele his story, as Cunningham seems to almost not believe himself. Of course, it is possible that in telling Van Cheele about Gabriel-Ernest's transformation into a wolf at **sunset**, Cunningham has been describing some kind of visual fantasy. The language he uses, calling the naked boy a "wild faun of Pagan myth," suggests an attitude that is more artistic than analytic.

Miss Van Cheele – Miss Van Cheele is Van Cheele's aunt, who lives with him on their estate. A doting, oblivious older woman, she is very fond of her nephew and encourages his superficial "naturalism." Keeping herself occupied with teaching Sunday school, Miss Van Cheele is very excited about the arrival of Gabriel-Ernest (whom she names), as she longs to see herself as a charitable patron. This leads her to ignore his strange behavior entirely, entrusting the Toop child to his care and eventually putting up a memorial to him in the local church.

The Toop Child – The Toop child is an unnamed, ungendered child who disappears along with Gabriel-Ernest. A member of Miss Van Cheele's Sunday school class, the Toop child is sent home with Gabriel-Ernest close to **sunset**, and they are both presumed drowned in the mill-race. If Gabriel-Ernest is indeed a **werewolf**, however, then it is more likely that he ate the Toop child. The Toop family, however, chooses to believe the first explanation, in no small part due to the fact that, as the story sarcastically puts it, they have 11 other children and are "decently resigned to [their] bereavement."

TERMS

Stuffed Bittern – A bittern is a long-necked species of bird, part of the heron family. Van Cheele keeps a stuffed, or taxidermized, bittern as decoration in his study, showing his interest in nature—or at least his desire to present himself as interested in nature.

Mill-Race – A mill-race is a fast-moving current of water, either manmade or redirected, which is used to turn a mill wheel. Because of this, it can be quite dangerous, leading some of the characters in "Gabriel-Ernest" to presume that the missing children fell into the mill-race and drowned, rather than that they were eaten by **Gabriel-Ernest**.

Parish Councillor – The parish council is the lowest level of local government in England. As a parish councillor, **Van Cheele** holds a position of power in his community.

Justice of the Peace – A justice of the peace is a local magistrate who primarily deals in minor legal cases. **Van Cheele's** position as a justice of the peace is prestigious but, the story implies, does not come with many actual responsibilities.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

The relationship—and tension—between appearance and reality is a central theme in "Gabriel-Ernest," influencing both events and how characters react to them. The author suggests that not only can appearances be deceiving, but that people will go to great lengths to ignore evidence that things are not what they seem. Van Cheele, as the owner of his woods, is highly concerned with how they appear to others, and much less interested in the actual state of things. Rather than seeking to really understand what he sees on his regular walks, Van Cheele builds up a repository of facts for later conversations, giving himself the appearance of being a "great naturalist." His expectation that reality conform to its external appearance is an important part of why Cunningham's remark about the **wild beast** in his woods is so concerning to him. In fact, once Van Cheele considers that the woods may not be as tranquil as they appear, he realizes he has already noticed—and until now ignored—signs of disturbance: the lack of game, missing livestock, and the miller's lost child. Van Cheele tries his best to restore his sense of calm and convince himself that nothing is amiss, telling himself that Gabriel-Ernest's strange behavior and references to "child-flesh" are nothing but a sick joke. Miss Van Cheele, meanwhile, is so charmed by Gabriel-Ernest's story of memory loss that she overlooks strange and sinister clues and embraces him as a personal project and Sunday school helper, even ensuring he is remembered as a hero after he disappears. The lack of evidence other than Gabriel-Ernest's discarded clothes leaves room for her to believe that he drowned trying to save the Toop child, and not that he ate the child after transforming into a wolf (although it is not clear than Van Cheele ever told her his theory). Overall, the Van Cheeles' reactions to Gabriel-Ernest show how desperately people will suppress and distort reality in order to uphold appearances that make sense to them.

SOCIAL STATUS AND HYPOCRISY

Closely intertwined with appearance and reality in "Gabriel-Ernest" are the themes of social status and hypocrisy. The efforts of the characters to protect their status and use it in self-serving ways lead almost directly to the story's tragic and arguably avoidable conclusion. The narrator tells readers that Van Cheele is not only a local landowner, but a "parish councillor and justice of the peace." Consequently, his primary concern upon encountering Gabriel-Ernest in the woods is not so much safety as his own reputation. Van Cheele is able to quickly dismiss the idea that Gabriel-Ernest actually ate the miller's baby, but is less confident that he could avoid the stigma that would come with public knowledge of the "savage," naked boy living in his woods. In particular, he fears that he will be held financially responsible for the missing livestock Gabriel-Ernest may have eaten, and so he avoids saying anything about his discovery until the boy arrives at his house. Van Cheele's aunt's ill-fated decisions are likewise motivated by an inverted but equally misguided awareness of social status, as she sees herself as a kind of philanthropist helping Gabriel-Ernest. The narrator ironically notes that "A naked homeless child appealed to Miss Van Cheele as warmly as a stray kitten or derelict puppy would have done." Fixated on this romantic idea, she avoids any close scrutiny of Gabriel-Ernest or his behavior, giving him access to the Toop child who subsequently disappears, and after his disappearance has him memorialized as a hero. Miss Van Cheele's feelings about Gabriel-Ernest have very little to do with observed reality, but rather her narcissistic desire to be the charitable patron of the "unknown boy." Both of the Van Cheeles' efforts to maintain a certain kind of social position—either protecting one's wealth or using it to appear morally superior—lead not only to hypocritical words and actions, but also to the Toop child's death. Though the Van Cheeles' out-of-touch concerns are humorous, the author uses them to make a more serious point, showing how preoccupation with status at the expense of honesty—to

oneself or to others—has harmful consequences for society more broadly.

WILD VS. DOMESTIC

Set in the English countryside, "Gabriel-Ernest" takes place in a natural environment which has been heavily reshaped by human life. The mystery of Gabriel-Ernest suggests that while humans may like to believe they control nature, the line between wild and domestic is actually thin and unpredictable .In fact, the very idea of a **werewolf** suggests that the clear division between wild and domestic is a false binary, and challenges the idea that humans can neatly separate them. Until Gabriel-Ernest's arrival, Van Cheele sees the woods not as true wilderness, but a domesticated realm under his control. His stuffed bittern is emblematic of his relationship to nature. As the narrator sarcastically describes, Van Cheele's interest in the natural life of the woods is aimed at providing fodder for conversation, not "assisting contemporary science," and he is confident that there is nothing in the woods besides game and perhaps "A stray fox or two and some resident weasels. Nothing more formidable." While Van Cheele is disturbed by his encounter with Gabriel-Ernest in the woods, his life is truly upended when Gabriel-Ernest shows up inside his house the next day. Ironically, and much to Van Cheele's frustration, his aunt is utterly oblivious to Gabriel-Ernest's wild nature, giving him his prim and proper new name and setting him to work in her Sunday school class, of all places. This comedic sequence of events goes to show that the line between the wild and the domestic, so important to Van Cheele's worldview, is much less clearly defined than he thinks—and hopes—it is. What is clear, however, is that the sense of normalcy—and security—that Van Cheele took for granted before Gabriel-Ernest's appearance may never return. As the mystery in the woods shows, humans can never really claim to have total knowledge—and with it, total control—over nature.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Fear of the unknown underlies many of Van Cheele's observations and deductions in "Gabriel-Ernest," leading him to conclusions that, while probable, cannot actually be proven as fact. By showing how fear of the unknown can motivate—and distort—reasoning, the author demonstrates the limits of human knowledge and control of the world. Van Cheele is presented as a man of knowledge, but a man who wants to *possess* knowledge, not a man who truly wants to learn. While the first appearance of Gabriel-Ernest is quite an "unexpected apparition," Van Cheele is most disturbed by the way that this naked boy's presence undermines his mastery of the woods and their contents. As he talks to Gabriel-Ernest, Van Cheele "began to have an irritated feeling that he was grappling with a problem that was eluding him," a foretaste of greater fears to come. When Gabriel-Ernest crosses the pool towards him moments later, he covers his throat "Almost instinctively." Van Cheele's inability to understand the boy feels like a primal threat, even though he can't prove that the boy intends to harm him.

Unable to solve the mystery of the boy's presence and thereby quell his fear, Van Cheele is abnormally quiet that evening at dinner. The next day, however, "his cheerfulness partially return[s]," as he believes that consulting Cunningham about what he saw in the woods will resolve his doubts. Unfortunately for Van Cheele, hearing Cunningham's story only fills him with terror, leading him to uncharacteristically "[tear] off at top speed towards the station," hoping to stop Gabriel-Ernest in time. Far from being something he can master, preferably easily, the reality of the mystery proves to be something that Van Cheele may be powerless to even understand, let alone control. His changing emotional states show how Van Cheele's thinking is powered primarily by fear, not curiosity. When the cause of the Toop child's death is ambiguous, it is unclear just how much Van Cheele's fear of the unknown was justified, but his arrogance and pretense to understanding the world around him seem humbled by his encounter with Gabriel-Ernest—or have at least been depicted by Saki with pointed irony.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WEREWOLF

The werewolf, or "wild beast," symbolizes Van Cheele's—and society's—limited ability to control or understand nature, and the consequent fear of the unknown this provokes. When Cunningham first tells Van Cheele that there is a wild beast in his woods, it is so far from the norm he is used to that he almost fails to register it. Van Cheele, in his arrogant and mistaken belief that his superficial knowledge of the woods is comprehensive, rejects the idea that they could contain something more dangerous than a fox or weasel. While the still-undefined wild beast of Cunningham's story and its potential traces—the missing game, livestock, and miller's child—represent the threat that nature can pose, this symbolism is further developed in the form of the werewolf.

Gabriel-Ernest, as a werewolf—both a human boy and a wild beast—demonstrates that nature is not only mysterious and even dangerous, but that one cannot draw a clear boundary between human life and the natural world. Even Gabriel-Ernest's human form is characterized as wild; his eyes have "an almost tigerish gleam in them," his "weird low laugh" is "pleasantly like a chuckle and disagreeably like snarl," and even

"Clothed, cleaned, and groomed," he loses "none of his uncanniness in Van Cheele's eyes." While at the story's conclusion it is left unclear whether or not Gabriel-Ernest really was a werewolf, and whether he really ate the Toop child and the miller's child, Van Cheele's faith in his knowledge of both nature and people—and what separates the two—has been deeply shaken.

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

The boundary between light and darkness, or day and night, symbolizes the ambiguous, unknowable line between the social and natural categories that make up Van Cheele's world. Van Cheele's routines are precisely structured around the day, as he enjoys his morning cigarette and his afternoon walk, among other pleasures. At night, a civilized person is expected to be safely at home, leading to Van Cheele's great surprise when Gabriel-Ernest tells him that he not only lives in the woods, but hunts in them at night, "on four feet." Van Cheele assumes at first that Gabriel-Ernest is working with "some clever poacher dog," showing how he associates nighttime with illicit activities like poaching.

While this assumption is incorrect, Van Cheele's suspicions are not unfounded. He learns from Cunningham that at sunset Gabriel-Ernest becomes a **werewolf**, shedding his form as a wild, naked boy and instead assuming that of "a large wolf, blackish in colour, with gleaming fangs and cruel, yellow eyes." Like the nighttime during which he hunts, the dark color of the wolf is inscrutable, further emphasizing the mysteriousness of his appearance. The fear that this transition into darkness inspires in Van Cheele is, ironically, made even stronger by the beauty of the sunsets immediately preceding it. When Cunningham sees Gabriel-Ernest, he is watching "the dying glow of the sunset," and assumes that Gabriel-Ernest is doing the same. Likewise, Miss Van Cheele comments on the beauty of the sunset to Van Cheele, unaware that it signals not only the coming night, but Gabriel-Ernest's transformation into the form of a wolf.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Everyman's Library edition of *Selected Stories* published in 2017.

Gabriel-Ernest Quotes

'There is a wild beast in your woods,' said the artist Cunningham, as he was being driven to the station. It was the only remark he had made during the drive, but as Van Cheele had talked incessantly his companion's silence had not been noticeable.

'A stray fox or two and some resident weasels. Nothing more formidable,' said Van Cheele. The artist said nothing.

'What did you mean about a wild beast?' said Van Cheele later, when they were on the platform.

'Nothing. My imagination. Here is the train,' said Cunningham.

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Cunningham (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Placed at the very beginning of the story, this dialogue introduces the characters Cunningham and Van Cheele, along with several key symbols and themes. Cunningham's statement about the wild beast immediately suggests this symbol's importance to the story going forward, and ominously suggests some kind of danger that's not yet clear. Cunningham's strange, enigmatic personality is also established, suggesting that not only are things perhaps not what they seem, but that the reader should be careful trusting how he (and other characters) interpret events to come. Van Cheele's oblivious, self-centered, and talkative nature is also introduced. Along with the suggested discrepancy between appearance and reality in Van Cheele's woods, this passage shows the uneasy balance between the wild and the domestic which Van Cheele takes for granted, if he is aware of it at all. Nevertheless, while perplexed by Cunningham's remark, Van Cheele is not afraid just yet; the statement is too vague, and Cunningham too unreliable of a source (and Van Cheele himself simply too oblivious) for him to treat it with the seriousness it later becomes clear it deserves.

He had a stuffed bittern in his study, and knew the names of quite a number of wild flowers, so his aunt had possibly some justification in describing him as a great naturalist. At any rate, he was a great walker. It was his custom to take mental notes of everything he saw during his walks, not so much for the purpose of assisting contemporary science as to provide topics for conversation afterwards. When the bluebells began to show themselves in flower he made a point of informing every one of the fact; the season of the year might have warned his hearers of the likelihood of such an occurrence, but at least they felt that he was being absolutely frank with them.

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Miss Van Cheele

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Van Cheele's character is further developed, showing that his talkativeness is closely connected to both his hobbies and his social position, as he strives to keep a constant supply of nature-related conversation-starters ready. There is a good deal of irony in his aunt referring to him as a "great naturalist"; the moniker clearly doesn't apply to Van Cheele's facile, superficial relationship to the woods he owns, and indicates Miss Van Cheele's own oblivious, even foolish attitude as she praises and encourages him.

Similarly, Van Cheele's "naturalist" conversations clearly have nothing to do with the listener's actual interest but are in fact aimed at demonstrating Van Cheele's own intelligence, or the appearance of it. What Saki suggests here is the completely surface-level relationship the Van Cheeles, and by extension others of their social class, have with the world around them. This passage also hints that their total lack of interest in the reality beneath appearances will have consequences as the story progresses, as Cunningham has already indicated that the natural environment in the woods may not be quite what Van Cheele thinks it is.

'You can't live in these woods,' said Van Cheele.

'They are very nice woods,' said the boy, with a touch of patronage in his voice.

'But where do you sleep at night?'

'I don't sleep at night; that's my busiest time.'

Van Cheele began to have an irritated feeling that he was grappling with a problem that was eluding him.

'What do you feed on?' he asked.

'Flesh,' said the boy, and he pronounced the word with slow relish, as though he were tasting it.

'Flesh! What flesh?'

'Since it interests you, rabbits, wild-fowl, hares, poultry, lambs in their season, children when I can get any; they're usually too well locked in at night, when I do most of my hunting. It's quite two months since I tasted child-flesh.'

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue between the boy and Van Cheele, immediately following the former's introduction, characterizes the boy as wild and unpredictable and foreshadows future events and discoveries. While it is surprising enough for Van Cheele to come across a naked boy in his woods, it is what the boy says, even more so than his strange appearance, that really disturbs him. Van Cheele's first recourse is to his social position; as the owner of the woods, he attempts to assert his property rights over the boy. This has little effect, and while in the moment it may seem that the boy is simply being rude and disrespectful, it becomes clear that, in fact, the rules of society do not apply to him. Hunting at night and feeding on flesh, the boy describes himself with animalistic qualities that, for the moment, only confuse Van Cheele, who is unable to incorporate them into any logical explanation for the situation. The objects of the boy's appetite offer further, truly disturbing clues, as the boy suggests that he has been feeding on "child-flesh." While this points to a clear connection between the boy and the wild beast, and hints that that symbol is also closely linked to nighttime, at present Van Cheele is most disturbed by his inability to understand—bringing the theme of fear of the unknown to the forefront.

> And then, as Van Cheele ran his mind over the various depredations that had been committed during the last month or two, he came suddenly to a dead stop, alike in his walk and his speculations. The child missing from the mill two months ago – the accepted theory was that it had tumbled into the mill-race and been swept away; but the mother had always declared she had heard a shriek on the hill side of the house, in the opposite direction from the water. It was unthinkable, of course, but he wished that the boy had not made that uncanny remark about child-flesh eaten two months ago. Such dreadful things should not be said even in fun.

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows Van Cheele beginning to see a connection with deeply troubling implications, as he puts together what the boy said to him with recent events in the area. He realizes that the missing livestock and game, which he saw as isolated, unimportant incidents, if he noticed at all, may be part of the same problem. This emphasizes the discrepancy between appearance and reality once again and shows how, until now, Van Cheele unconsciously avoided taking seriously the small pieces of evidence that suggested something was amiss,. Most disturbing, however, is the potential connection he draws between the boy's joke, or what Van Cheele hopes was a joke, about "child-flesh," and the miller's missing child. Here Van Cheele sees the horrifying possibility that the boy really did eat the child, and literally stops in tracks. Unable to make sense of it, Van Cheele does his best to reject this conclusion, telling himself that it must have been nothing more than a sick joke on the boy's part. While this is clearly not enough to truly soothe his growing fear, it shows how far he will go, even overruling his own intuition, to convince himself that things are what they seem and nothing more.

> His position as a parish councillor and justice of the peace seemed somehow compromised by the fact that he was harbouring a personality of such doubtful repute on his property; there was even a possibility that a heavy bill of damages for raided lambs and poultry might be laid at his door.

Related Characters: Van Cheele

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This passage makes explicit what was only suggested earlier: that Van Cheele has some power and importance in his community. Not only is he the owner of a relatively large property, including his woods, but he holds legislative and judiciary offices as well. These roles are not necessarily particularly involved, however, and given what has so far been revealed of Van Cheele's character, it is likely that he occupies them in a largely ceremonial manner.

Nevertheless, this quote demonstrates that not only is Van Cheele invested in the appearance of normality in his woods for his own comfort, but also out of concern for his social and financial position. Van Cheele's deep selfishness is further emphasized by his concern for both his reputation and the possibility of a monetary fine from his association with the boy, after he has just considered the far graver possibility that the boy was responsible for the disappearance of a child. A justice of the peace who is unwilling to investigate a potential murder is clearly not the most dedicated servant of the law.

> 'Where's your voice gone to?' said his aunt. 'One would think you had seen a wolf.'

Van Cheele, who was not familiar with the old saying, thought the remark rather foolish; if he *had* seen a wolf on his property his tongue would have been extraordinarily busy with the subject.

Related Characters: Miss Van Cheele (speaker), Van Cheele

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This passage helps link the symbol of the wild beast and the wolf or werewolf together, as well as connecting them, by implication, to the boy. The degree to which Van Cheele has been thrown off balance by his encounter is made clear by his very uncharacteristic silence, which his aunt comments on with an old idiom. At the time the story takes place, wolves had already been extinct in England for at least 200 years, and this idiom is therefore quite disconnected from

any real sense of danger. The irony of Miss Van Cheele's statement, foreshadowing future revelations, is that perhaps Van Cheele really *did* see a wolf, in the form of the boy. Likewise, if his tongue *was* "extraordinarily busy with the subject," even at the risk of being misunderstood, perhaps unfortunate events to come could have been avoided. Van Cheele, however, does not realize how ironically appropriate his aunt's remark is, and Miss Van Cheele remains, characteristically, completely unaware as well.

> A naked homeless child appealed to Miss Van Cheele as warmly as a stray kitten or derelict puppy would have done.
>
> 'We must do all we can for him,' she decided, and in a very short time a messenger, dispatched to the rectory, where a page-boy was kept, had returned with a suit of pantry clothes, and the necessary accessories of shirt, shoes, collar, etc. Clothed, clean, and groomed, the boy lost none of his uncanniness in Van Cheele's eyes, but his aunt found him sweet.
>
> 'We must call him something till we know who he really is,' she said. 'Gabriel-Ernest, I think; those are nice suitable names.'

Related Characters: Miss Van Cheele (speaker), Van Cheele, Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This passage establishes how Miss Van Cheele's self-centered, hypocritical concern with social status, both her own and others', differs from and reinforces Van Cheele's. While Van Cheele is most concerned with maintaining his position and avoiding any damage to his reputation, his aunt longs to see herself as a philanthropist of sorts, and is instantly taken with the supposedly lost boy as a result. This has much less to do with the boy himself than with the idea he represents to her; indeed, Miss Van Cheele seems to pay hardly any attention to the boy's actual appearance or behavior. She asks no questions at all, taking Van Cheele's very brief explanation that the boy has lost his memory at face value and immediately filling in the blanks with her fantasies of charity. This leads her to not only clothe and clean him, but to give him the name Gabriel-Ernest, a high-class-sounding and thus highly ironic moniker for a wild, deceitful, and potentially dangerous boy.

> Cunningham was not at first disposed to be communicative.
>
> 'My mother died of some brain trouble,' he explained, 'so you will understand why I am averse to dwelling on anything of an impossibly fantastic nature that I may see or think I have seen.'

Related Characters: Cunningham (speaker), Van Cheele

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This brief passage is quite important, suggesting a radically different interpretation of the entire story. As the reader was shown at the beginning of the story, Cunningham is a strange, enigmatic individual, a man of few words who does not try especially hard to make himself understood. This of course is perfectly fine for his friend Van Cheele, who prefers to do the talking himself and leave the listening to others, but given what Cunningham says here, perhaps the reader should be skeptical of his testimony. As an artist, Cunningham is already predisposed to the visual, seeing the world in striking, painterly images, such as that of the wild beast. Taken together with the knowledge that his mother died of "brain trouble," and his own description of what he saw in Van Cheele's woods as something "of an impossibly fantastic nature" that he avoids dwelling on, the reader could interpret Cunningham's vision as just that: a fantasy.

> 'Suddenly I became aware of a naked boy, a bather from some neighbouring pool, I took him to be, who was standing out on the bare hillside also watching the sunset. His pose was so suggestive of some wild faun of Pagan myth that I instantly wanted to engage him as a model, and in another moment I think I should have hailed him. But just then the sun dipped out of view, and all the orange and pink slid out of the landscape, leaving it cold and grey. And at the same moment an astounding thing happened – the boy vanished too!'
>
> 'What! vanished away into nothing?' asked Van Cheele excitedly.
>
> 'No; that is the dreadful part of it,' answered the artist; 'on the open hillside where the boy had been standing a second ago, stood a large wolf, blackish in colour, with gleaming fangs and cruel, yellow eyes.'

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Cunningham (speaker), Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

As the previous passage suggests, Cunningham's description of Gabriel-Ernest's transformation from naked boy to fearsome wolf is a vivid image, but is also not necessarily the truth. If Cunningham did see what he describes, then the wild beast and Gabriel-Ernest are one and the same: a werewolf. This also makes explicitly clear what the connection between the symbols of the wild beast and nighttime is, as Gabriel-Ernest transforms into a wolf after sunset and begins to hunt. This at last provides a plausible explanation for all the seemingly disconnected, disturbing events in Van Cheele's woods. Per this interpretation, Gabriel-Ernest is not only responsible for the missing game and livestock, but the disappearance of the miller's child as well, and, it is hinted, further horrors to come. This would also explain the boy's own bizarre behavior, such as his nakedness and his choice to live in the woods. At the same time, if the reader rejects Cunningham's testimony, Gabriel-Ernest may not be responsible, though in that case his own bizarre behavior remains unexplained.

❝ Mrs Toop, who had eleven other children, was decently resigned to her bereavement, but Miss Van Cheele sincerely mourned her lost foundling. It was on her initiative that a memorial brass was put up in the parish church to 'Gabriel-Ernest, an unknown boy, who bravely sacrificed his life for another.'

Van Cheele gave way to his aunt in most things, but he flatly refused to subscribe to the Gabriel-Ernest memorial.

Related Characters: Van Cheele, Gabriel-Ernest (The Boy), Miss Van Cheele

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which concludes the story, ties together the tension between appearance and reality with a powerful stroke of irony. The other characters, not having observed Gabriel-Ernest up close or learned what Van Cheele has heard from Cunningham, all choose to believe the plausible explanation that he died trying to save the Toop child. Mrs. Toop, with 11 other children, seems to need the lost child less than she does a sense of normalcy, echoing the way the Van Cheeles prioritized this stability above all else throughout the story. Similarly, the disappearance of Gabriel-Ernest and lack of clear evidence that he was a werewolf leads Miss Van Cheele to double down in her belief that she was being a great philanthropist by helping him, and so she refuses to see that he could have been responsible for the child's death. Indeed, for Miss Van Cheele, the Toop child's disappearance seems much less significant than Gabriel-Ernest's alleged heroism, leading her to have a memorial put up for him in their local church. Regardless of what really happened, it seems that this interpretation will be the one remembered for posterity, a bitter comment from Saki on how society remembers the truth. Van Cheele, however, refuses to support the Gabriel-Ernest memorial, a rare occasion of resistance to his aunt. Whether this indicates genuine growth for him in other spheres of life, however, is left unclear.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GABRIEL-ERNEST

As Van Cheele is driving his guest, the artist Cunningham, back to the train station from his house in the countryside, Cunningham tells him that "There is a **wild beast** in your woods." Van Cheele answers that there are foxes and weasels, but nothing larger or more dangerous. Cunningham says nothing more, and the talkative Van Cheele at first pays his ominous statement no mind. Arriving at the train station, Van Cheele asks Cunningham what he meant by what he said. Instead of answering him, Cunningham tersely responds "Nothing. My imagination," and as his train arrives, he departs without saying anything more.

This opening passage sets the story in the English countryside. Van Cheele's position of power in his community as the owner of the woods is alluded to, as well as his neglect of them, as he ignores Cunningham's disturbing warning. Cunningham's remark about a wild beast in the woods introduces a sense of foreboding, and Van Cheele's inability to fully dismiss its presence could suggest that, on some level, he fears the unknown and allows this fear to shape his beliefs. His initial insistence that only small, harmless animals live on his land suggests that he feels a sense of control and perhaps superiority over the natural world. Yet the beast raises the possibility that what appears to be true (at least from Van Cheele's perspective) may not align with reality. Cunningham's enigmatic personality and potential lack of reliability are also highlighted in his reluctance to elaborate.

Returning home, Van Cheele takes one of his habitual afternoon walks through his woods. He pays close attention to his surroundings as he does, "not so much for the purpose of assisting contemporary science as to provide topics for conversation afterwards." Van Cheele is quite interested in plants and animals as a topic of conversation, and his aunt who lives with him describes him as a "great naturalist." In fact, he makes a point of lecturing at his friends and acquaintances about seasonal changes in his woods, such as when the bluebells begin to flower.

Van Cheele's attitude toward his woods as a conversation starter rather than a living, wild place demonstrates his oblivious and hypocritical nature, concerned much more with appearances than reality. This also introduces the importance of social status in the story. The author shows how, to Van Cheele, the woods are a tool to gain social status, not something to be respected, understood, and perhaps even feared.

On this particular walk, however, Van Cheele sees something quite unusual in the woods: an approximately 16-year-old boy lying naked by a pool of water, drying himself off in the sunlight. Stunned into silence by this surprise, Van Cheele cannot imagine where this "wild-looking" boy with a "tigerish gleam" in his eyes could have come from. He recalls that the miller's wife lost her baby two months ago—they assumed that it drowned in the mill-race—but the difference in age means that this boy could not be the same child.

Van Cheele is not only caught unawares, but is surprised by the fact that he's surprised, further demonstrating how he takes his safety and sense of control over his environment for granted. Likewise, it takes this surprise to keep Van Cheele quiet, forcing him to observe more closely rather than just talk. Van Cheele's recollection about the missing child hints that things may indeed be amiss in the woods, and that there may have been other clues that he has either not noticed or unconsciously dismissed.

Van Cheele asks the boy what he is doing in his woods; responding sarcastically, the boy tells him that he lives there, sleeping during the day and keeping busy at **night**. When Van Cheele asks him what he eats, the boy responds "Flesh," that of wild and domestic animals, and "child-flesh," though he says that he has not been able to get his hands on children for two months. Brushing this off as a dark joke, Van Cheele continues to question him. The boy tells him that he hunts at night, on four feet, and when Van Cheele asks if he means that the boy hunts with a dog, the boy says that no dog would be "very anxious for [his] company, especially at night." When Van Cheele, feeling increasingly unsettled, tells the boy he cannot continue to stay in the woods, the boy takes off into the woods.

The boy's sarcasm and lack of deference to Van Cheele, on his own property, is a clear violation of social norms. His strange statements and appearance, however, make this the least of Van Cheele's worries. While Van Cheele most likely also eats "Flesh," at least that of animals, the boy's animal-like descriptions of his hunting plainly distinguish him from Van Cheele and other humans; what he says about "child-flesh" definitively crosses a line, though whether as a bad joke or a terrifying admission is not yet clear. That the boy hunts at night also places him far outside of social normality. Van Cheele tries to fit the boy into familiar social categories such as criminality, wondering if he is a poacher and trying to evict him from the woods, but is left with no answers and a growing sense of discomfort about what he does not know.

Walking home, Van Cheele remembers what Cunningham said regarding the "**wild beast**." Reflecting on both his conversation with the boy and recent events in the area, he wonders if the boy could be responsible. Game, poultry, and other livestock have all been missing lately. Suddenly, Van Cheele connects the miller's missing child to the boy's statement regarding "child-flesh." Both events took place two months ago, and the miller's wife maintained that she had heard a scream "on the hill side of the house, in the opposite direction from the water." Van Cheele struggles to dismiss this disturbing thought.

Looking back at recent events, Van Cheele realizes that he did indeed ignore evidence that something out of the ordinary was happening in his woods and the surrounding farms. Game, or wild animals hunted for sport, has been missing, as has livestock from nearby farms. Worst of all, the miller's child went missing. At this point, however, Van Cheele only has a series of separate incidents before him and no coherent theory to connect or explain them. Rather than soothing him, this lack of explanation, a feeling Van Cheele is not used to, only deepens his worries.

At dinner, Van Cheele is not his usual talkative self, keeping quiet about his encounter in the woods. He worries that his social position could be damaged by association with the boy; as he is a "parish councillor and justice of the peace," there is even a chance that he could be fined for the missing poultry and livestock if the boy is really responsible. Van Cheele's aunt asks him "Where's your voice gone to? […] One would think you had seen a **wolf**." Missing the joke, Van Cheele dismisses her statement, thinking to himself that if he had actually seen a wolf in his woods, he would most certainly be talking about it.

The implication that Van Cheele, as a landowner, is an important man is his community is confirmed here, as readers learn that he also holds legislative and judiciary positions. His hypocrisy and concern for his own status clearly overrule any concern for his safety or the safety of his community; whether this is because Van Cheele is truly that self-centered or because he simply cannot imagine a genuine danger in his woods is left ambiguous. Van Cheele's aunt's joke about seeing a wolf both recalls what Cunningham said about the wild beast and disturbingly hints what might be happening in the woods. This saying also highlights the apparent incongruity of danger with the peaceful English countryside, as wolves became extinct in England at least 200 years before the time in which this story is set.

The next day at breakfast, Van Cheele makes up his mind to visit Cunningham in the next town over and find out why he said what he did about the "**wild beast**" in his woods. Feeling reassured by his plan of action, Van Cheele enters the morning-room as part of his daily routine and is shocked by the sight of the boy lying naked on his ottoman. As his aunt enters, Van Cheele quickly throws a copy of the *Morning Post* over the boy, telling her that "This is a poor boy who has lost his way— and lost his memory."

Van Cheele hopes that by consulting Cunningham, he can solve the mystery and relieve his own worries. That this is suddenly derailed by the boy's appearance in his morning-room highlights how fragile Van Cheele's separation of the wilderness from his domestic life is. Faced with explaining to his aunt what he cannot even explain to himself, Van Cheele's instinctual (and comical) response is to cover things up, both literally and metaphorically, providing a more socially acceptable explanation for the boy's wild behavior and appearance.

Compelled by Van Cheele's story of the boy's lost memory, Van Cheele's aunt insists that the boy is clothed, cleaned, and taken care of. As the boy has no name, she decides to call him Gabriel-Ernest. While he is no longer naked and dirty, the boy continues to worry Van Cheele. Van Cheele's doubts are further supported by the reactions of his animals; his reliable old dog runs out of the house and refuses to come back in, and his typically cheerful canary chirps quietly and fearfully in its cage. Van Cheele resolves to go see Cunningham at once, while his aunt sets Gabriel-Ernest to work entertaining the children in her Sunday-school class.

Van Cheele's aunt shares his selective vision and hypocrisy, though she expresses it somewhat differently; this implies that their obliviousness is at least in part a product of their elite social and class status. The prim and proper clothes, name, and tasks she gives the wild boy, now Gabriel-Ernest, build both dramatic and comedic tension, showing how superficially she considers him and his story. The fear Gabriel-Ernest inspires in Van Cheele's domestic animals further affirms his wild character, hinting that the animals can intuit something Van Cheele does not yet understand, and his aunt is completely ignorant of.

Cunningham is not immediately helpful, referring to his mother's death from "brain trouble" to explain his wish to avoid thinking too much about fantastic, abnormal events and images. At Van Cheele's urging, however, he tells him what he saw. On his last night at Van Cheele's, Cunningham was standing by the hedges watching the **sunset**, when he noticed a naked boy doing the same on the hillside, in a pose "suggestive of some wild faun of Pagan myth." Cunningham was about to call out to him, hoping to use him as a painting model. As the sun set, however, the boy vanished. Instead, on the hillside in the boy's place stood a large, threatening **wolf**.

As was suggested earlier, Cunningham has a penchant for strange ideas and cryptic statements; perhaps his words should be viewed more skeptically. The way he describes what he saw, and his own words about his mother, leave open the possibility that his artist's imagination has distorted his vision of reality. Nevertheless, he finally offers a compelling, if fantastical, explanation for Gabriel-Ernest's behavior and the mysterious happenings in and around the woods.

Van Cheele does not wait to hear the rest of Cunningham's story, taking off for the train station as fast as he can. Deciding that a telegram to his aunt explaining that "Gabriel-Ernest is a **werewolf**" would not be understood, he feels that his only option is to reach home before dark. Reaching home just before **sunset**, he learns that his aunt has sent Gabriel-Ernest to take "the little Toop child home," for safety. Van Cheele runs out once again, hoping to reach the Toops' house before it is too late.

The revelation that Gabriel-Ernest is a werewolf does not relieve Van Cheele of his fears as he had hoped. In fact, knowing the truth may be even worse. It is uncharacteristic of Van Cheele to learn something so fantastic and not share it immediately, but he now realizes that some things are so out of the ordinary they cannot be understood or even effectively communicated. For once his tendency not to stop and think is in his favor as he launches into action rather than getting caught up in words. His guileless aunt, however, has been fully taken in by Gabriel-Ernest's wholesome appearance (or the appearance she projected onto him), creating a perfect opportunity for him to strike again.

Just before Van Cheele comes in sight of Gabriel-Ernest and the Toop child, **the sun goes down** and he hears "a shrill wail of fear." There is no sign of either of them except for Gabriel-Ernest's clothes lying by the side of the road. Because of this, others assume that the child fell into the mill-race alongside the road and Gabriel-Ernest jumped in to save it, drowning in the attempt, though some workers also claim to have heard the scream that Van Cheele did.

Without having seen for themselves what happened, Van Cheele, his aunt, and the community can only reconstruct the disappearance of Gabriel-Ernest and the Toop child from the evidence available. This leads many to assume that they both drowned, making Gabriel-Ernest a hero, while the same evidence confirms for Van Cheele that he was a werewolf and ate the child as night fell and he transformed into a wolf. Ultimately, however, no one will ever know for sure, leaving the mystery and the fear it inspired in a permanent state of irresolution for Van Cheele.

As the Toops had 11 children, they do not think of the alleged drowning as anything more than an ordinary, everyday tragedy, let alone something supernatural. Van Cheele's aunt, however, is distraught at the loss of Gabriel-Ernest and has a memorial added to the parish church which reads "Gabriel-Ernest, an unknown boy, who bravely sacrificed his life for another." Though Van Cheele often supports his aunt's wishes, he squarely refuses to have anything to do with the Gabriel-Ernest memorial.

Most of the community is clearly content to fit the facts into the least disturbing narrative, quickly smoothing things over and returning to their regular lives. Miss Van Cheele in particular prioritizes her own sense of charity above all else, despite actually knowing nothing about Gabriel-Ernest or what happened that night. Van Cheele, on the other hand, refuses to accept this more comfortable explanation. While his blissful ignorance may be gone forever, the story also suggests that he has grown as a character, both viewing the world around him more carefully and coming to accept the limits of his own knowledge. Of course, it is also possible, in Saki's ironic presentation, that the lessons Van Cheele learned from this will have little to no impact on other parts of his life, and he will go on living just the way he did before.

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