

THE WOLVES OF CERNOGRATZ

Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)

9th and 10 grade English Mr. Widelitz

1) Read The Wolves Of Cernogratz by Saki

Literary Critique

Answer the following questions:

- 1) Briefly restate the legend of the wolves of Cernogratz.
- 2) How does the merchant of Hamburg differ from his relatives?
- 3) How is the Baroness' character shown in her explanation of the existence of the legend?
- 4) Explain the difference between the version of the legend presented by the Baroness and that stated by Amalie? Why is this difference important?
- 5) Why is the Baroness upset when Amalie retells the legend?
- 6) How does one "dust memories" (see page 163)?
- 7) Why does the Baroness never mention grandfathers?
- 8) What is the Baroness' attitude toward her servants? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.
- 9) Why do the wolves howl that night?
- 10) What is the significance of the time of year in which Amalie dies?

- 11) Why does the governess have a look of "long-delayed happiness"?
- 12) Why does a tree fall in the forest?
- 13) What is significant about the explanation for the fallen tree given by the banker's wife?
- 14) What is ironic about the obituary notice placed in the newspapers? What does it tell us about the Baroness?

Writing Workshop

In a three-to-four paragraph essay, share a legend that has been part of your family's history. If you cannot recall such a legend, create one using your imagination. Common family legends include tales of hardship, courage, and sacrifice experienced by grandparents and great-grandparents as they built their lives in a new country or new community. Other options include family legends about childhood escapades, early school experiences or challenging crises.

All work must have your name and class.

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The Wolves of Cernogratz

Saki

FOCUS: SATIRE

"Are there any old legends attached to the castle?" asked Conrad of his sister. Conrad was a prosperous Hamburg* merchant, but he was the one poetically-dispositioned member of an *eminently* practical family.

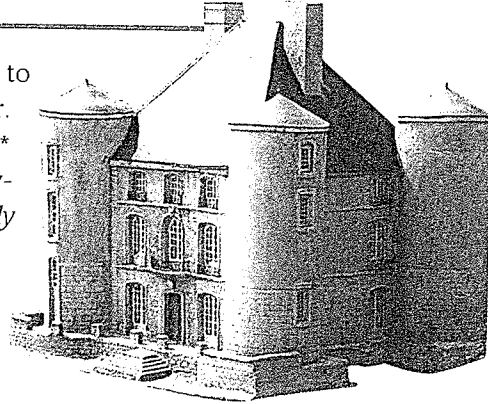
The Baroness Gruebel shrugged

"There are always legends hanging about these old places. They are not difficult to invent and they cost nothing. In this case there is a story that when any one dies in the castle all the dogs in the village and the wild beasts in forest howl the night long. It would not be pleasant to listen to, would it?"

"It would be weird and romantic," said the Hamburg merchant.

"Anyhow, it isn't true," said the Baroness *complacently*; "since we bought the place we have had proof that nothing of the sort happens. When the old mother-in-law died last springtime we all listened, but there was no howling. It is just a story that lends dignity to the place without costing anything."

"The story is not as you have told it," said Amalie, the grey old governess. Every one turned and looked at her



What is the Baroness' attitude toward the legend associated with the castle?

Hamburg — a city in northern Germany, and the largest seaport in continental Europe.

*H*ELPFUL
DEFINITIONS

in astonishment. She was *wont* to sit silent and prim* and faded in her place at table, never speaking unless some one spoke to her, and there were few who troubled themselves to make conversation with her. To-day a sudden *volubility* had descended on her; she continued to talk, rapidly and nervously, looking straight in front of her and seeming to address no one in particular.

FYI The position of a **governess** in Europe's class structure was often difficult. Her education set her off from the other servants, who would work, live, and dine together in an area of the house separate from the family. The governess lived and ate with the family, but as often as not the family members managed to remind her of her inferior social position.

Why is there
"a note of defiance,
almost of contempt"
in the governess'
voice?

What is implied
by the phrase,
"much-too-
well-dressed"?

Why is the Baroness
so sarcastic?

"It is not when any one dies in the castle that the howling is heard. It was when one of the Cernogratz family died here that the wolves came from far and near and howled at the edge of the forest just before the death hour. There were only a few couple* of wolves that had their *lair*s in this part of the forest, but at such a time the keepers say there would be scores of them, gliding about in the shadows and howling in chorus, and the dogs of the castle and the village and all the farms round would bay and howl in fear and anger at the wolf chorus, and as the soul of the dying one left its body a tree would crash down in the park. That is what happened when a Cernogratz died in his family castle. But for a stranger dying here, of course no wolf would howl and no tree would fall. Oh, no."

There was a note of defiance, almost of contempt, in her voice as she said the last words. The well-fed, much-too-well dressed Baroness stared angrily at the *dowdy* old woman who had come forth from her usual and *seemly* position of *effacement* to speak so disrespectfully.

"You seem to know quite a lot about the von Cernogratz legends, Fraulein Schmidt," she said sharply; "I did not know that family histories were among the subjects you are supposed to be *proficient* in."

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

prim — formally precise or proper.

a few couple — here, a few pairs.

The answer to her *taunt* was even more unexpected and astonishing than the conversational outbreak which had provoked it.

"I am a von Cernogratz myself," said the old woman, "that is why I know the family history."

"You a von Cernogratz? You!" came in an *incredulous* chorus.

"When we became very poor," she explained, "and I had to go out and give teaching lessons, I took another name; I thought it would be more in keeping.* But my grandfather spent much of his time as a boy in this castle, and my father used to tell me many stories about it, and, of course, I knew all the family legends and stories. When one has nothing left to one but memories, one guards and dusts them with especial care. I little thought when I took service with you that I should one day come with you to the old home of my family. I could wish it had been anywhere else."

There was silence when she finished speaking, and then the Baroness turned the conversation to a less embarrassing topic than family histories. But afterwards, when the old governess had slipped away quietly to her duties, there arose a clamour of *derision* and disbelief.

"It was an *impertinence*," snapped out the Baron, his protruding eyes taking on a scandalised expression; "fancy the woman talking like that at our table. She almost told us we were nobodies, and I don't believe a word of it. She is just Schmidt and nothing more. She has been talking to some of the peasants about the old Cernogratz family, and raked up their history and their stories."

"She wants to make herself out of some consequence,"* said the Baroness; "she knows she will soon be past work* and she wants to appeal to our sympathies. Her grandfather, indeed!"

The Baroness had the usual number of grandfathers, but she never, never boasted about them.

in keeping — more appropriate; here, more appropriate to her current station in life.

consequence — here, importance.

past work — too old to continue working.

Why does the governess wish to be working "anywhere else"?

Why is the topic of "family histories" embarrassing to the Baroness?

How is the Baron's response almost predictable?

Why doesn't the Baroness boast about her grandfathers?

*HELPFUL
DEFINITIONS*

What have we already learned about the merchant from Hamburg that is now being confirmed?

"I dare say her grandfather was a pantry boy or something of the sort in the castle," sniggered* the Baron; "that part of the story may be true."

The merchant from Hamburg said nothing; he had seen tears in the old woman's eyes when she spoke of guarding her memories — or, being of an imaginative disposition, he thought he had.

"I shall give her notice to go as soon as the New Year festivities are over," said the Baroness; "till then I shall be too busy to manage without her."

What is revealed about the Baroness' personality?

But she had to manage without her all the same, for in the cold biting weather ..., the old governess fell ill and kept to her room.

"It is most provoking," said the Baroness, as her guests sat round the fire on one of the last evenings of the dying year; "all the time that she has been with us I cannot remember that she was ever seriously ill, too ill to go about and do her work, I mean. And now, when I have the house full, and she could be useful in so many ways, she goes and breaks down. One is sorry for her, of course, she looks so withered and shrunken, but it is intensely annoying all the same."

"Most annoying," agreed the banker's wife, sympathetically; "it is the intense cold, I expect, it breaks the old people up. It has been unusually cold this year."

"The frost is the sharpest that has been known in December for many years," said the Baron.

Why does the Baroness wish she had dismissed the governess earlier?

"And, of course, she is quite old," said the Baroness; "I wish I had given her notice some weeks ago, then she would have left before this happened to her. Why, Wappi, what is the matter with you?"

The small, woolly lapdog had leapt suddenly down from its cushion and crept shivering under the sofa. At the same moment an outburst of angry barking came from the dogs in the castle-yard, and other dogs could be heard yapping and barking in the distance.

Based on what we have read so far, why may the dogs be disturbed?

"What is disturbing the animals?" asked the Baron.

And then the humans, listening intently, heard the sound that had roused the dogs to their demonstrations of fear and rage; heard a long-drawn whining howl, ris-

sniggered — laughed disrespectfully.

HELPFUL
DEFINITIONS

ing and falling, seeming at one moment leagues* away, at others sweeping across the snow until it appeared to come from the foot of the castle walls. All the starved, cold misery of a frozen world, all the relentless hunger-fury of the wild, blended with other forlorn and haunting melodies to which one could give no name, seemed concentrated in that wailing cry.

"Wolves!" cried the Baron.

Their music broke forth in one raging burst, seeming to come from everywhere.

"Hundreds of wolves," said the Hamburg merchant, who was a man of strong imagination.

Moved by some impulse which she could not have explained, the Baroness left her guests and made her way to the narrow, cheerless room where the old governess lay watching the hours of the dying year slip by. In spite of the biting cold of the winter night, the window stood open. With a scandalised exclamation on her lips, the Baroness rushed forward to close it.

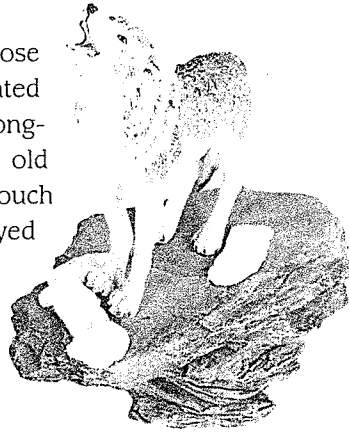
"Leave it open," said the old woman in a voice that for all its weakness carried an air of command such as the Baroness had never heard before from her lips.

"But you will die of cold!" she *expostulated*.

"I am dying in any case," said the voice, "and I want to hear their music. They have come from far and wide to sing the death-music of my family. It is beautiful that they have come; I am the last von Cernogratz that will die in our old castle, and they have come to sing to me. Hark, how loud they are calling!"

The cry of the wolves rose on the still winter air and floated round the castle walls in long-drawn piercing wails; the old woman lay back on her couch with a look of long-delayed happiness on her face.

"Go away," she said to the Baroness; "I am not lonely any more. I am one of a great old family ..."



leagues — units of measurement each equal to approximately three miles.

What "impulse" moves the Baroness?

Why does the governess' voice suddenly have "an air of command"?

Why is there "a look of long-delayed happiness" on the face of the governess?

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

"I think she is dying," said the Baroness when she had rejoined her guests; "I suppose we must send for a doctor. And that terrible howling! Not for much money would I have such death-music."

Why can't the music be bought for any amount of money?

"That music is not to be bought for any amount of money," said Conrad.

"Hark! What is that other sound?" asked the Baron, as a noise of splitting and crashing was heard.

It was a tree falling in the park.

There was a moment of *constrained* silence, and then the banker's wife spoke.

"It is the intense cold that is splitting the trees. It is also the cold that has brought the wolves out in such numbers. It is many years since we have had such a cold winter."

What does this remark, and the Baroness' agreement, demonstrate?

The Baroness eagerly agreed that the cold was responsible for these things. It was the cold of the open window, too, which caused the heart failure that made the doctor's ministrations* unnecessary for the old Fraulein. But the notice in the newspapers looked very well —

What is omitted from the death notice? What is added to it?

"On December 29th, at Schloss* Cernogratz, Amalie von Cernogratz, for many years the valued friend of Baron and Baroness Gruebel."



? CHECKQUIZ

1. Who are the current residents of Schloss Cernogratz?
2. Who is Amalie? What is her connection to the Schloss?
3. Briefly restate the legend of the wolves of Cernogratz.
4. Why does Amalie wish to leave the windows open in her room?
5. Why does a tree fall in the forest?
6. What notice is placed in the newspaper by the Baroness?

HELPFUL
DEFINITIONS

ministrations — here, medical care.

schloss — (German) a castle.

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