

# The Lumber Room



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAKI

The Scottish writer Hector Hugh Munro, or H. H. Munro, is best known by his pen name, Saki. Munro was born in 1870 in Burma (now Myanmar), where his father was a military police officer. When Munro was two year old, his mother died, and he and his sisters were sent to England to live with their grandmother and aunts, who were very strict with the children. Later, Munro went on to satirize authoritarian adults in his fiction and also criticize the stilted social mores of Edwardian (or early 20th-century) England. While he began his career as a political journalist, Munro established himself as a successful author and is best known for his witty short stories. In November 1916, he was killed in action in World War I.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Saki's fiction was written in England during the Edwardian period. One of the characteristics of the literature of this age is its critique of the extreme morality of the Victorian era which preceded it. This is evident in much of Saki's work, including the "Lumber Room." Also, he was writing during the time of the British Empire, and Saki was born in the British colony of Burma. He returned briefly to work there as a police officer, just like his father, before he contracted malaria and had to return to England. His fascination with the exotic treasures from the East is apparent in "The Lumber Room" when Nicholas, the story's young protagonist, finds the sandalwood box filled with strange brass figures and a bird book with pictures of colorful tropical birds. These items from the empire are portrayed as fascinating, beautiful, wild, and uncharted in opposition to the staid English house and garden the story is set in.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A recurring trope in Saki's fiction is that of a young person rebelling against the adult world, which is often represented by a strict aunt. Another of his famous short stories, "Sredni Vashtar," revisits this theme in a much more violent way than "The Lumber Room." In "Sredni Vashtar," a young boy adopts a mongoose and imagines it is a god. He prays to it to save him from his aunt, which the mongoose ends up doing by killing her. Saki's fiction also inspired the precocious, rebellious children in Roald Dahl's fiction, like the eponymous character in *Matilda*. Roald Dahl was a self-professed fan of Saki's work, and said, "In all literature, he was the first to employ successfully a wildly outrageous premise in order to make a serious point," a style that Dahl himself often ended up using in his own fiction. Saki's

fiction is often funny and satirizes the social mores of his time, and in this way is similar to the works of Oscar Wilde. Like "The Lumber Room," Wilde's most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, mocks Victorian society's strict social customs.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Lumber Room"
- **When Written:** 1910s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1914
- **Literary Period:** Edwardian
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** An Upper-class English home with a "lumber room," which is a room used to store unused furniture and household objects
- **Climax:** Nicholas refuses to help the aunt climb out of the rain-water tank, pretending that he thinks she is the devil trying to trick him.
- **Antagonist:** The Aunt
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**True Life.** According to Saki's sister Ethel Munro in her biography of her brother, the aunts whom they grew up with were very similar to the aunt in "The Lumber Room." Saki seems to have very closely based the aunt in the story on his own aunts who terrified him and his siblings with their strict rules.

**What's in a Name?** No one is exactly sure where Munro picked his pen name "Saki" from. Many assume that it is inspired by the name of a character from a Persian poem called the *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyam*. However, it might also be a reference to a type of South American monkey by the same name.



## PLOT SUMMARY

A young boy named Nicholas refuses to eat his breakfast of bread-and-milk because, he claims, there is a frog in it. The aunt he lives with (who is his cousins' aunt, but insists that she is Nicholas's aunt, too) demands that he stop making up ridiculous tales because it is impossible for a frog to be in his breakfast. However, Nicholas has himself put the frog in his breakfast bowl and is pleased to point out that the aunt was wrong when she said it was impossible. To punish Nicholas for refusing to eat his breakfast and for putting a frog in his food, the aunt sends the other children (Nicholas's boy-cousin, girl-

cousin, and younger brother) on a trip to Jagborough while Nicholas is to stay home. This is a form of punishment that the aunt favors. When the children don't follow her rules, she comes up with fun activities to exclude the wrongdoer from.

The aunt expects Nicholas to be sad about missing the trip, but he doesn't seem to be. Instead, when the girl-cousin scrapes her knee right before they depart and cries, Nicholas happily points out to the aunt that the girl cried very loudly. Nicholas also points out that Bobby will not enjoy the trip because his boots are too tight. The aunt wonders why Bobby didn't tell her about this, and Nicholas replies that Bobby told her twice, but that she often does not listen when the children tell her "important things."

The aunt adds to Nicholas's punishment, saying that he is to stay out of the gooseberry garden. Seeing the stubborn expression on Nicholas's face, the aunt assumes that he plans to disobey her just for the sake of it. Even though she has other things to do, the aunt stations herself in the front garden with some menial gardening work just so she can catch Nicholas if he tries to sneak into the gooseberry garden.

Nicholas feigns an interest in the gooseberry garden by walking past the doors leading into it a couple of times. He only wants to ensure that his aunt will stand guard in the front garden, leaving him free to put his real plan into action. When he is sure that she is out of his way, he rushes into the library and finds the key to **the lumber room**. Only adults are allowed to enter this room, and Nicholas has been working for a while on a plan to go inside and explore it.

When he enters the lumber room, Nicholas finds it to be as magical as he had hoped. While the rest of the aunt's house is largely unexciting, the lumber room is filled with fascinating curiosities like a **tapestry** depicting a hunting scene in which a man has shot an arrow into a stag but is unaware of four approaching wolves. Nicholas loses himself in the story the tapestry depicts, wondering whether the man and his two dogs will be able to escape the wolves, and if there are perhaps more than four wolves. He also finds many other thrilling objects in the lumber room, like candlesticks shaped like twisted snakes, and a teapot shaped like a duck.

Suddenly, Nicholas hears his aunt calling his name, asking him to come out of the gooseberry garden because she can see him there. Nicholas smiles to himself, because he knows she is lying. Soon after, he hears his aunt scream and call for someone to hurry to her. Nicholas locks up the lumber room and goes to the front garden to investigate. His aunt calls to him from the gooseberry garden and says that she has fallen into the rain-water tank. She asks him to bring her a ladder so she can climb out, but Nicholas responds by saying that he was told to stay out of the gooseberry garden. The aunt hastily tells him that she has changed her mind and that he can now enter it. To this, Nicholas replies that she doesn't sound like his aunt, and that he suspects the "Evil One" is in the water tank, not his aunt. He

asks if there will be strawberry jam for tea, and when the aunt says there will be, Nicholas triumphantly declares that this is evidence that it is indeed the Evil One in the water tank pretending to be his aunt. When the children had asked the aunt for strawberry jam the previous day, she'd said there wasn't any. So clearly, Nicholas says, she couldn't have known there were four jars of it in the store cupboard. Nicholas had looked, so he knew, and the Evil One in the water tank knew, but the aunt didn't know. The Evil One has given himself away, Nicholas says, and walks away without helping the aunt out of the water tank. She is finally rescued 35 minutes later by a kitchen maid.

Later that day, teatime is quiet. The aunt is upset after being stuck in the water tank. The children did not enjoy their trip to Jagborough because the tide was high and no one got to play in the sand, and Bobby is in a bad mood because of his tight boots. Nicholas is quiet, too, imagining a conclusion to the story on the tapestry, wondering if the hunter and his dogs would manage to escape if they left the stag to the wolves.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Nicholas** – The protagonist of "The Lumber Room," Nicholas is a young and mischievous boy who lives with three other children—his younger brother, his girl-cousin, and his boy-cousin—and his cousins' aunt. He often clashes with the aunt, who is a strict and unpleasant guardian to the children. Nicholas doesn't seem particularly attached to the other children he lives with, dismissing his younger brother as "boring" and finding it amusing when his girl-cousin scrapes her knee and cries. While the other children must also endure the aunt's rules and punishments, they don't seem to actively rebel against her like Nicholas does, perhaps because he feels injustices more keenly than they do and is bolder than they are. He also doesn't invite any of these children to join in his scheme to enter **the lumber room**, saving it for a day when he can carry out his plan alone. The aunt has forbidden the children from entering this room, but Nicholas has a carefully constructed plan to do just that. He has accounted for every detail in his plan, right from getting the other children and aunt out of the way to practicing how to turn a key in a lock, all of which are evidence of his meticulousness and intelligence. He has an impressive imagination that lets him construct worlds out of the pictures and household objects he finds in the lumber room, such as the **tapestry**. Nicholas is also a careful observer and accurately anticipates how the aunt will react to certain situations. He uses his understanding of her nature to manipulate her and to show her to be a liar and hypocrite. A charming troublemaker, Nicholas disrupts an old, dusty order with his creativity and wit.

**The Aunt** – The antagonist of the story, Nicholas’s cousins’ aunt seems to be the only adult responsible for the four children under her charge, though the story implies that there are other adults in the household as well. The aunt steps up to the challenge of this daunting task by attempting to run a tight ship, demanding obedience from her charges and doling out harsh punishments for offenders. She is often cruel to the children, inventing picnics and treats just to punish the wrongdoers by excluding them from the fun. She is also unconcerned or unaware about the children’s needs or wellbeing, focusing all her energy on ensuring their obedience. Nicholas calls her out on this in the story; after informing her that Bobby’s boots are too tight, and that he told the aunt this twice, Nicholas declares, “You often don’t listen when we tell you important things.” She is frustratingly petty, like when she tells the children there is no strawberry jam even though she has four jars of it, and uses religion to scare the children into line, telling Nicholas that he often obeys the Evil One. Though she would like to be in full control of the children, she often fails at this, especially when it comes to her dealings with Nicholas. He is not afraid of her or her punishments, and he understands her completely and can predict her actions and reactions. The aunt, on the other hand, lacks this sharpness of thought and has no idea what to make of Nicholas or his tricks, leaving herself vulnerable to him and ending up completely speechless when he shows her to be a liar.

**Bobby** – A child in the same household as Nicholas and the aunt. He is either Nicholas’s younger brother or his boy-cousin, but the story doesn’t specify which. Just after the other children depart for Jagborough, Nicholas mentions to the aunt that Bobby won’t enjoy himself on the excursion since his boots are too tight. When the aunt wonders why Bobby didn’t mention the boots to her, Nicholas says that Bobby told her about it (twice!) but that she never listens to them. When the children return from the beach later in the story, Bobby is indeed grumpy because his boots were too tight, which prevented him from having any fun on the trip. Bobby’s character highlights Nicholas’s powers of observation and deduction as well as the aunt’s ignorance of the real concerns the children have.

**Girl-Cousin** – Nicholas’s girl-cousin lives in the same household as Nicholas and the aunt. She scrapes her knee right before the children leave to the beach and cries. Nicholas is impressed by how loudly she cried, but his aunt is certain she will forget all about her knee when she has fun at the beach. The girl-cousin’s tears are in contrast to Nicholas’s complete nonchalance when the children depart. This disappoints the aunt, who would have liked Nicholas to cry so she could be sure her punishment was effective.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Nicholas’s Brother** – Nicholas’s younger brother lives in the

same household as Nicholas and the aunt. Nicholas finds him “quite uninteresting.” He goes on the trip to Jagborough with the girl-cousin and the boy-cousin.

**Boy-Cousin** – Nicholas’s cousin who lives in the same household as Nicholas and the aunt. He goes on the trip to Jagborough with the girl-cousin and Nicholas’s younger brother.



## 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.



### ADULTS, CHILDREN, AND POWER

“The Lumber Room” is set in early 20th-century England, a time when children were expected to always be on their best behavior and unquestioningly obey adults. However, the story’s protagonist, a mischievous boy named Nicholas, goes against the grain of this expectation. As punishment for one of his many tricks, his cousins’ authoritarian aunt (who is not technically Nicholas’s aunt but “insist[s], by an unwarranted stretch of imagination, in styling herself his aunt also”) bars Nicholas from joining the other children on a trip to the sea. However, he ends up having an extraordinarily happy day at home, plotting his way into the forbidden **lumber room**, a mysterious locked room that only the adults are allowed to enter. Saki’s allegiance is with Nicholas, and when Nicholas refuses to obey the authoritarian aunt he lives with, thereby stripping her of her power over him, it is a moment of victory. At the end of the story, power has shifted from the aunt to Nicholas, and Saki implies that this is right and fitting because adults aren’t always worthy of the power they wield over children.

Throughout the story, Saki is critical of the aunt and describes her as being a small-minded bully rather than an adult worthy of respect and deference. When the story opens, Nicholas’ cousins and younger brother are going to the beach, but Nicholas is not being allowed to accompany them because he is “in disgrace” for putting a frog in his breakfast as a joke. The aunt has “hastily invented” the trip because “it was her habit, whenever one of the children fell from grace, to improvise something of a festival nature from which the offender would be rigorously debarred.” Clearly, the aunt organizes fun activities for the children solely to exclude and punish those who do not play by her rules, which makes her come across as petty and manipulative. She is one of the “older, wiser, and better people” (namely, adults) who have the authority to tell children what to do and how to be. However, Saki implies that

though she might be older, she is neither wiser nor better than Nicholas, and is undeserving of the power she holds.

In contrast, the children in the story are portrayed in a much more sympathetic manner. For instance, when Nicholas tells his aunt that one of the children, Bobby, will not enjoy himself at the beach because his boots are too tight, the aunt is surprised to hear it. Nicholas says: "He told you [about the boots] twice, but you weren't listening. You often don't listen when we tell you important things." With this, the story emphasizes that the children are voiceless and powerless under the aunt. She largely ignores their opinions and needs. The other three children are packed off to the sands of Jagborough just to punish Nicholas, though they might not really wish to go. One of them has tight boots, while another (Nicholas's girl-cousin) skins her knee before they depart and leaves in tears. The aunt remains unaffected by or unaware of all this.

While the other children seem to play by the aunt's rules, Nicholas is a rebel. His very first action in the story is a refusal to follow the aunt's orders, and his attempts to thwart his aunt's rules are depicted as humorous and clever. Saki sides with Nicholas's transgressions, implying that the boy is superior to his aunt and deserves the position of power he achieves at the end of the story. For instance, as part of his punishment, Nicholas's aunt orders him not to enter the gooseberry garden. While he has no interest in the garden, he pretends that he does. He wants the aunt to stand guard there so he can "rapidly put into execution a plan of action that had long germinated in his brain," which is to explore the lumber room (a storage room, mainly containing spare furniture, in upper-class homes). Until this point in the story, the reader, like the aunt, believes that she has been in control of the events of the day. However, it is now clear that Nicholas has been working on his plan for a while and has effortlessly manipulated the aunt into doing exactly what he wants her to do.

Later, when the aunt topples into the water tank and asks Nicholas for his help—promising him a treat of strawberry jam if he does—he gleefully refuses. He claims that she must be the "Evil One" and not really his aunt, because "when [the children] asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday she said there wasn't any." He says, "I know there are four jars of it in the store cupboard, because I looked, and of course you know it's there, but she doesn't, because she said there wasn't any. Oh, Devil, you have sold yourself!" Of course, Nicholas knows that it is his aunt stuck in the water tank and not some evil presence trying to tempt him. With this little speech, Nicholas reveals to his aunt that he is aware of her lies and hypocrisy, and cleverly puts her in a position where she is unable to defend herself. He has the upper hand, and the tyrant is satisfyingly deposed.

At the conclusion of the story, the aunt is upset by the events of the day and maintains the "frozen muteness of one who has suffered undignified and unmerited detention." Nicholas, on the other hand, doesn't gloat over his victory or revel in her

sadness. He has already moved on to thinking about the interesting **tapestry** he discovered in the lumber room. This is in complete contrast to the aunt, who expected "a few decent tears" from Nicholas when she prevented him from going to the beach at the beginning of the story. As the story comes to a close, Saki seems to imply that Nicholas wields his power with a largesse that she lacks.



## IMAGINATION

Nicholas, the protagonist of "The Lumber Room," is a quick-witted boy with a robust imagination. He comes up with very creative ideas to escape from and rebel against the drab rules imposed on him by the authoritarian aunt he lives with. Throughout the story, Saki celebrates Nicholas for being an especially imaginative child and makes it clear that he disapproves of the aunt's stultifying ways. With this, Saki suggests that children's imagination and curiosity are wonderful things, and he is critical of adults who discourage them.

Throughout the story, Saki upholds the boy's fantastic imagination as a source of humor and wonder and contrasts it with the aunt's glaring deficiencies in that department. She is described as "a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration," dogged in her single-minded pursuit of obedience from the children in her charge. At the beginning of the story, the narrator points out that the aunt is Nicholas's cousins' aunt and not actually Nicholas's aunt, but she "insisted, by an unwarranted stretch of imagination, in styling herself his aunt also." The narrator then goes on to explain the punishment she "invented" for Nicholas. Thus, the entire force of the aunt's imagination and innovativeness is limited only to preserving her authority. In contrast, Nicholas is teeming with creative ideas and imagination. His quick thinking gives him a huge advantage over the aunt, while she ends up defenseless against his machinations. For instance, Nicholas tricks the aunt into "self-imposed sentry duty" at the gooseberry garden so he can have some time to explore the **lumber room** (a room the children are forbidden to enter). The aunt easily falls into this trap—and then literally falls into a nearby water tank—painting her as slow-witted. Because of his vivid imagination and curious mind, Nicholas comes across as her intellectual superior.

Also, in her attempts to stifle the children's imagination and creativity, the aunt keeps her home and the children's lives bland and sterile. For instance, the children's breakfast is boring bread-and-milk, which Nicholas refuses to eat. The aunt has previously refused to give him strawberry jam, lying that there was none. It seems that even from the food she offers the children, the aunt is in favor of the unexciting. Similarly, while exploring the lumber room, Nicholas is struck by "a teapot fashioned like a china duck, out of whose open beak the tea was supposed to come." He thinks, "How dull and shapeless the nursery teapot seems in comparison!" Once again, when

choosing for the children, the aunt has opted for the “dull” option. Additionally, the lumber room is described as a “region that was so carefully sealed from youthful eyes and concerning which no questions were ever answered.” So, the aunt not only keeps the imaginative treasures of the lumber room locked away but also denies the children any information about it, and in this way stifles their imagination and curiosity.

Saki implies that adults (like the aunt) relegate fun and imagination to a room kept under lock and key in order to achieve a sterile sense of orderliness, but that this makes everyone’s lives empty and uninteresting. In contrast, Nicholas dives headlong into ideas and imagination, and though it causes some chaos that unthreads the orderliness that the aunt so desperately tries to cultivate, Saki suggests that children need the space to delight in their imaginations and explore their curiosity. Despite being discouraged and punished by his aunt, Nicholas’s wit and imagination cannot be repressed. By rebelling against her strictures, he enters the lumber room which he discovers is a “storehouse of unimagined treasures.” The lumber room is mostly filled with unused household objects that others might consider boring, but to Nicholas they are fascinating and beautiful. His imagination and unbridled curiosity transform these objects into treasures. When he comes across a **tapestry** that was used as a fire screen, he is transfixed by the picture it depicts of a hunter who has just shot a stag while four wolves approach him without his knowledge. This scene becomes “a living, breathing story” for Nicholas, and he spends “many golden minutes” inspecting its various details and trying to figure out what will happen next in the story of the tapestry. It lingers in his thoughts even hours later, at teatime that evening when the children come back disappointed from their trip to Jagborough and the aunt is seething at being left in the water tank for so long. Nicholas shares in their silence, but unlike the others who are unhappy and sulking, he is pleasantly lost in the magic of his imagination, still thinking about the tapestry he encountered in the lumber room. His imagination helps him to escape the dullness and discomfort that surrounds him. Thus, for Saki, Nicholas’s imagination has great power and value, and he is critical of the aunt’s attempts to curb it.



### MORALITY AND HYPOCRISY

The two main characters in “The Lumber Room”—Nicholas and the aunt he lives with—are both complex characters who behave in less-than-perfect ways throughout the story. Nicholas is a mischievous rebel, and judging by the aunt’s frustration and constant punishments, it seems that living with a child like him who is up to tricks all the time is extremely tiresome. Yet, while some of Nicholas’s tricks might be wrong—like ruining his breakfast by putting a frog in it—Saki implies that his tricks are not nearly as bad as the aunt’s self-righteous bullying and lies.

From the outset, Nicholas is characterized as an aggravating

trickster who is “in disgrace” for the trouble that he causes. At the very opening of the story, he refuses to eat his breakfast because there is a frog in it, and when the aunt asks him to stop talking the “veriest nonsense,” he reveals that he knows for a fact that there is a frog in his food because he was the one who put it there. Later in the story, when the aunt has fallen into a water tank in the garden and asks Nicholas to help her get out, he refuses. He uses his aunt’s rule as a reason not to help her—“I was told I wasn’t to go into the gooseberry garden,” he says—but clearly, he is once again up to his tricks.

Yet, Nicholas is, after all, a child, and Saki describes his tricks with affectionate humor, making it clear that they are either harmless or merited. When he puts a frog in his breakfast, he wants to make a point that adults are not always correct about the things they express certainty about. If they think a frog in a breakfast of bread-and-milk is impossible, Nicholas will take it upon himself to demonstrate that it is not. A more generous adult might find his thought process somewhat charming, but the aunt definitely isn’t such a person. To her, it is a crime worthy of punishment. Also, the aunt doesn’t seem to be a good caregiver to her young charges. She is ignorant of Bobby’s tight boots because, as Nicholas points out to her, she doesn’t listen to the children when they tell her “important things.” She also seems to enjoy denying them small pleasures, like strawberry jam, for no good reason. When seen in this context, Nicholas’s rebellions against her seem like small, well-deserved victories.

In contrast to Nicholas’s impish tricks, the aunt is characterized as a dishonest hypocrite, which, in Saki’s eyes, makes her Nicholas’s moral inferior. The narrator describes her as “soi-disant aunt” and “aunt-by-assertion” because she isn’t really Nicholas’s aunt, even though she claims to be. She is in fact “his cousins’ aunt who insisted [...] in styling herself his aunt also.” Nicholas has caught on to her fundamental dishonesty, which is revealed in her misrepresentation of the relationship they share. Later in the story, Nicholas is exploring the **lumber room** when he hears the aunt outside, yelling for him to come out of the gooseberry garden. She has forbidden him from going into the garden and suspects he is there, but, of course, he isn’t. “I can see you all the time,” the aunt calls out, which makes Nicholas smile as he realizes that she is lying once again—she can’t possibly see him hiding in the garden, as he’s hidden away in the lumber room.

Later, when the aunt falls into the rain-water tank in the gooseberry garden and calls for Nicholas to help her out, Nicholas refuses. He pretends to think that it must be the Devil inside the water tank pretending to be his aunt in order to fool him. To test this supposed hypothesis, he asks if he may have strawberry jam with his tea, which his aunt readily agrees to. Nicholas claims that this proves it is the Devil in the water tank, and not his aunt, because “when [the children] asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday she said there wasn’t any.” He says, “I know there are four jars of it in the store cupboard, because I

looked, and of course you know it's there, but she doesn't, because she said there wasn't any. Oh, Devil, you have sold yourself!" He then walks away triumphantly, leaving the aunt in the tank. The aunt has paraded herself as the guardian of morality and has often told Nicholas "that the Evil one tempts [him] and that [he] always yield[s]," so when Nicholas reveals her to be a liar, she has no comebacks. Even though Nicholas's decision to leave his aunt inside the water tank isn't a moral one, the story implies that the aunt very much deserved her brief sojourn there.



## THE WORLD OF CONVENTIONS VS. THE NATURAL WORLD

There is a dichotomy in the story between the aunt's well-ordered, rule-bound world and the losing battle it faces against the unruliness of children and nature. Everything about the aunt is prim and proper: she governs the children with a firm hand, is quick to punish them when they are "in disgrace," and overall runs a tight ship. However, throughout the story, the aunt's attempts at order and propriety constantly fail against Nicholas's mischievous schemes. Because of him, the natural world keeps creeping into the household, be it in the form of Nicholas's beast-like, wild behavior, or the frog he sneaks into his breakfast. Through this dynamic, Saki seems to suggest that conventions and enforced civility are powerless veneers against the natural wildness within human nature and the natural world.

The aunt's world of conventions and her strict governing style only create the illusion of order and control. She spends most of her time in the story engaged in "trivial gardening operations" to ensure that Nicholas will stay out of the gooseberry garden. But her obsession with keeping Nicholas from trampling in her well-manicured garden—and thus preventing chaos from seeping into her orderly environment—is completely ineffective. While the gooseberry garden does go untouched, Nicholas instead heads right into the secrets and chaos of the **lumber room**. Also, in order to maintain control over her unhappy and rebellious charges, the aunt has to regularly resort to threats and punishments. This points to an underlayer of rancor and disorder in her carefully curated world. The children seem to be regularly misbehaving and her various punishments do not appear to be giving her much control over them. Her favorite punishment—that of inventing and then withholding fun trips and activities from the children who disobey her—seems to recur in their lives pretty frequently, without bringing any constant sense of order to their household.

This illusion of order that the aunt struggles to enforce is easily punctuated by forces of nature, the chief of which is Nicholas himself. In the volume of Saki's short stories (*The Complete Short Stories of Saki*), "The Lumber Room" is part of a smaller collection entitled *Beasts and Super Beasts*. Indeed, Nicholas

demonstrates enough wild energy and stubbornness of purpose to fall into either one of these categories. He emerges as the victor at the end of the story while the aunt is upset and defeated after being left in the water tank. Also, Nicholas has no fear of the aunt when he is up to mischief like putting a frog in his breakfast, showing that he is immune to her strict rules and easily dismantles the orderly atmosphere she tries desperately to maintain. The frog ruins the bland and "wholesome bread-and-milk" just like Nicholas brings disorder into the aunt's boring household. It is also extremely easy for Nicholas to sneak the frog (which is part of the natural world) into the house even though the adults think it is impossible, showing that their trust in convention and orderliness is misplaced.

Another example in the story of the natural world foiling the aunt's careful plans is the tide at Jagborough, where she sends the other three children in order to punish Nicholas for the frog trick by not allowing him to go with them. When the children are leaving, the aunt would like to see Nicholas shed a "few decent tears," but he does not give her this satisfaction. She goes on to tell Nicholas that "it will be a glorious afternoon for racing about over those beautiful sands," implying that he will miss out on a lot of fun. But when the children return, they are dejected because the tide was at its highest at Jagborough, leaving them no sand to play on. Thus, nature intervenes, and the aunt's plan to punish Nicholas by keeping him from accompanying the other children turns into a comic failure.

The "unimagined treasures" that Nicholas finds in the lumber room is another example of the wild world that has already infiltrated the ordered household. The objects that Nicholas finds there are a veritable menagerie of birds and animals: candlesticks shaped like snakes, teapots shaped like ducks. Nicholas is most fascinated by the tapestry that depicts a hunting scene. In it, a hunter has shot a stag but is unaware that four wolves are approaching him. Nicholas is unimpressed by the hunter, who he notices doesn't have much skill since he shot the stag at very close range, and also doesn't have enough arrows in his quiver to fight off the wolves. While the hunter, like the aunt, thinks he has the situation under control, he is completely unaware of the chaos that is approaching in the form of the wolves. Thus, in the "Lumber Room," Saki suggests that wildness seems to always triumph over tame conventions. Nicholas is the clear winner in the battle with his aunt, representing the victory of wildness over enforced civility.



## SYMBOLS

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



## THE LUMBER ROOM

In the story, the lumber room symbolizes wildness and imagination, and the aunt's decision to bar the children from this room represents her affinity for propriety and orderliness. In upper-class English homes, the lumber room was used to store extra furniture and unused knickknacks. This seemingly uninteresting room is described as a place of great mystery and wonder in the story. The aunt does not allow the children inside, and even refuses to answer their questions about it. Nicholas is very curious about this forbidden place and concocts an elaborate plan to enter it. When he succeeds in doing so, he is struck by the contrast between the "wonderful things for the eye to feast on" that he finds there and the aunt's "bare and cheerless" house. He is particularly fascinated by a **tapestry** that depicts a hunting scene and he also admires other unusual objects he finds, like a candlestick shaped like twining snakes, a teapot shaped like a duck, and a book containing pictures of exotic birds.

Interestingly, all these objects have some association with animals or birds, suggesting that the lumber room is a place of wildness as opposed to the decorum of the rest of the house. Also, Nicholas interacts with these objects by imagining them into life. The tapestry is "a living, breathing story" to him, and he "assign[s] a life-history" to a mandarin duck he finds in the bird book. In the lumber room, Nicholas is free to make the imaginative leaps that his minds yearns for, away from the aunt's prescriptions of behavior and thought. The adults keep children away from this room because they don't want them to be freethinkers. In the story, the other children don't attempt to attain this freedom of thought, but Nicholas, with his wit and bravery, tries and succeeds. He seems to be touched by the special wild, captivating quality of the lumber room even after he leaves it. When the family is at tea at the end of the story and is sitting together in stony silence, lost in their own personal miseries, Nicholas is quiet like the rest but floats above their discomfort, thinking about the story of the tapestry.



## THE TAPESTRY

The image on the tapestry Nicholas discovers in **the lumber room** becomes a symbol for the story's conflict between wildness and propriety, suggesting that Nicholas's wildness will triumph over the aunt's attempts to subdue him. Nicholas is fascinated by this tapestry, which is a decorative fire-screen, but to him is "a living, breathing story." It shows a picture of a huntsman who has shot an arrow into a stag, and his two spotted dogs leaping to join in the chase. For Nicholas, the most interesting part of the picture is the wolves who are approaching the huntsman from the woods, suggesting that he feels a sense of kinship with these wild creatures. He notices that the huntsman has only two arrows left in his quiver, which would not suffice to take down the four wolves

headed his way. Also, Nicholas does not have a high opinion of the huntsman's skills, noting that he shot the stag at very close range in a heavily wooded area that must have hidden him well. In the story, this bumbling huntsman represents adults like the aunt who believe themselves to be in power and are convinced they are enforcing order, but they are in reality unprepared to take on clever young people with wild ideas (like Nicholas). To Nicholas, the odds are stacked against the huntsman and he initially concludes that "the man and his dogs were in a tight corner." However, he returns to thinking about this tapestry again at the end of the story, and comes up with a solution that might permit the hunter to escape the wolves: "it was just possible, he considered, that the huntsman would escape with his hounds while the wolves feasted on the stricken stag." To save life and limb, the huntsman must sacrifice his prize and leave it to the wolves. That the wolves will still feast implies that Nicholas (and others like him) will not be stopped by mere rules and aunts, but since the huntsman might escape, Nicholas seems to be acknowledging that the aunt might not immediately be defeated.



## QUOTES

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

### The Lumber Room Quotes

☝ The children were to be driven, as a special treat, to the sands at Jagborough. Nicholas was not to be of the party; he was in disgrace. Only that morning he had refused to eat his wholesome bread-and-milk on the seemingly frivolous ground that there was a frog in it.

**Related Characters:** Nicholas's Brother, Boy-Cousin, Girl-Cousin, The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

The opening lines of "The Lumber Room" immediately set Nicholas apart from the other children, suggesting that he is more important and interesting than they are. While the others are namelessly grouped together, Nicholas is "not [...] of the party." He makes a remarkable first impression as a fascinating troublemaker who is "in disgrace" and is therefore to be excluded from a trip to the sands at Jagborough that the other, more obedient children are

being treated to. The nature of the punishment seems severe, suggesting a strict and authoritarian household.

Nicholas's claim that there is a frog in his "wholesome bread-and-milk" is memorably extraordinary and is the first of what will be recurring images in the story of the wild, natural world infiltrating this apparently ordered household. His claim about the frog is a "seemingly frivolous" one, which indicates it is not frivolous at all—there is a real frog in his breakfast. Right from the outset, Nicholas comes across as an unusual child who has orchestrated an unusual situation.

“You said there couldn't possibly be a frog in my bread-and-milk; there was a frog in my bread-and-milk,” he repeated, with the insistence of a skilled tactician who does not intend to shift from favourable ground.

**Related Characters:** Nicholas (speaker), The Aunt

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

When the aunt discovers that there actually is a frog in Nicholas's breakfast because he has put it there himself, she gives him a lengthy scolding and decides to punish him by excluding him from the trip to Jagborough. Nicholas, however, seems to have no regrets about carrying out his very creative plan to skip eating his bland breakfast and he is not bothered by these consequences to his actions, which shows that he is immune to the aunt's strict rules. Instead, he takes great pleasure in pointing out the aunt's error when she had said that it was not possible for a frog to be in his food. He has just demonstrated that it is completely possible to sneak a frog from the garden into his breakfast (though it might be unexpected), and he would like the aunt to admit that she was mistaken—which, of course, she doesn't. The aunt is the sort of person who never likes to admit her mistakes. She is also too caught up in controlling the children's behavior to appreciate the humor and imagination in this strange event.

His cousins' aunt, who insisted, by an unwarranted stretch of imagination, in styling herself his aunt also, had hastily invented the Jagborough expedition in order to impress on Nicholas the delights that he had justly forfeited by his disgraceful conduct at the breakfast-table. It was her habit, whenever one of the children fell from grace, to improvise something of a festival nature from which the offender would be rigorously debarred[.]

**Related Characters:** Nicholas's Brother, Girl-Cousin, Boy-Cousin, The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 272

### Explanation and Analysis

After Nicholas refuses to eat his breakfast because there is a frog in it and everyone discovers that he has put the frog in his food himself, the aunt decides to punish him for this naughty trick. When the aunt is introduced in the story for the first time, she is said to be Nicholas's cousins' aunt "who insisted[...]in styling herself his aunt also," suggesting that Nicholas does not quite agree with this claim because he is aware of her stretching the truth while defining their relationship. While the aunt lacks Nicholas's creative imagination, she is described as taking on the role of Nicholas's aunt by "an unwarranted stretch of the imagination," which indicates that when she does use her imagination, it is to lie and assume a position of authority from which she can command Nicholas's obedience.

Another negative way in which she uses her imagination is by inventing punishments for the children. She comes up with fun activities from which she excludes the children who disobey her. This punishment by exclusion is aimed to hurt the children's feelings and highlights the aunt's cruel authoritarianism. Also, since this is termed a "habit" of hers, suggesting that it is a regular occurrence, the aunt's punishments do not actually seem to be working to improve the children's behavior. They seem to be misbehaving often, and she seems to be punishing them regularly. Thus, the order that the aunt is trying to enforce appears to be constantly failing.

“Bobby won’t enjoy himself much, and he won’t race much either,” said Nicholas with a grim chuckle; “his boots are hurting him. They’re too tight.”

“Why didn’t he tell me they were hurting?” asked the aunt with some asperity.

“He told you twice, but you weren’t listening. You often don’t listen when we tell you important things.”

**Related Characters:** Nicholas, The Aunt (speaker), Girl-Cousin, Bobby

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 273

### Explanation and Analysis

When the other children are leaving to Jagborough, the aunt expects Nicholas to cry so she can savor the fact that her punishment hurt him like she intended it to. Nicholas, however, doesn’t give her this satisfaction and seems quite cheerful. To instigate some remorse and regret on his part, the aunt points out that the children will have so much fun racing on the sands, to which Nicholas replies that Bobby will not. Nicholas, who is a close observer of the world around him, knows all about Bobby’s tight boots. He also cleverly points out this detail at the perfect moment, ruining the aunt’s claim that the other children will have a wonderful day at the beach. The aunt is annoyed by this, causing her to reply with “asperity” (or with a harsh tone). However, it’s the aunt’s own fault that she doesn’t know this; Bobby has told her about them twice. Nicholas says she often doesn’t listen to the children when they tell her important things, suggesting that she is a poor caregiver and that Nicholas is well-aware of this. It also suggests that Nicholas listens carefully and remembers what people say, which will become important later when he uses the aunt’s words against her.

“The aunt had many other things to do that afternoon, but she spent an hour or two in trivial gardening operations among flower beds and shrubberies, whence she could keep a watchful eye on the two doors that led to the forbidden paradise. She was a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration.”

**Related Characters:** Nicholas, The Aunt

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 273

### Explanation and Analysis

The aunt does not like it when Nicholas points out her failings as a caregiver and accuses her of not listening when the children tell her important things. In retaliation, she adds on another layer to his punishment, telling him that he must stay out of the gooseberry garden. Nicholas seems unhappy about this, so the aunt suspects that he will disobey her and sneak into the gooseberry garden, which she thinks of as “the forbidden paradise.” She stations herself in the garden so she can guard the doors that lead out to the gooseberry garden and catch Nicholas if he tries to enter it. She spends an impressive amount of time there—“an hour or two”—pretending to be busy, even though she has “many other things to do that afternoon.” The aunt comes across as rather foolish here. She is inconveniencing herself, too, in her desperation for control. In contrast to Nicholas, who is bursting with creative ideas, the aunt is described as “a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration,” and she is obsessed with the idea of ensuring that the children obey her.

“As a matter of fact, he had no intention of trying to get into the gooseberry garden, but it was extremely convenient for him that his aunt should believe that he had; it was a belief that would keep her on self-imposed sentry-duty for the greater part of the afternoon. Having thoroughly confirmed and fortified her suspicions Nicholas slipped back into the house and rapidly put into execution a plan of action that had long germinated in his brain.”

**Related Characters:** The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 273

### Explanation and Analysis

Until this point in the story, it seems like Nicholas *is* interested in entering the gooseberry garden though the aunt has told him to stay out, but here, the reader discovers that Nicholas has no intention of doing that. The only reason he is sneaking around the doors to the gooseberry garden is because he wants to raise the aunt’s suspicions that he plans to disobey her. He wants her to stay in the garden on “self-imposed sentry-duty” so he is free to embark on his real quest, which is to explore the lumber room inside the house. Nicholas pulls off this complicated

and impressive scheme, demonstrating his splendid planning and intelligence. His plan to explore the forbidden lumber room is one that has “long germinated in his brain,” so he clearly is a meticulous planner who has thought about this for a long time and grabs the opportunity when he can. Nicholas manipulates the aunt into staying out of his way while she doesn’t have the faintest suspicion that she is being tricked. The contrast between the two of them is striking, with Nicholas being obviously smarter.

☛ Often and often Nicholas had pictured to himself what the lumber-room might be like, that region that was so carefully sealed from youthful eyes and concerning which no questions were ever answered. It came up to his expectations. [...] [I]t was a storehouse of unimagined treasures.

**Related Characters:** The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 273274

### Explanation and Analysis

Nicholas has been curious about the lumber room for a long time and has often wondered what it might be like inside. He concocts an elaborate plan to enter it, and when he finally does, he is pleased at what he finds. In old British houses, the lumber room was used to store extra furniture and unused household items, and it is interesting that Nicholas likens these things to “unimagined treasures.” It speaks to the power of his imagination that he finds these domestic objects so fascinating.

In the story, the lumber room becomes a symbol for the imagination, and Nicholas enjoys this room so much because his imagination can run free here, away from the aunt’s insistence on obedience and propriety. Because of this, the aunt goes to great lengths to ensure that the children stay out of this room, even refusing to answer their questions about it.

☛ That part of the picture was simple, if interesting, but did the huntsman see, what Nicholas saw, that four galloping wolves were coming in his direction through the wood?

**Related Characters:** Nicholas

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 274

### Explanation and Analysis

In the lumber room, Nicholas finds a tapestry that is meant to be a fire screen and he is fascinated by it. The tapestry has a hunting scene on it, depicting a huntsman who has shot a stag. Nicholas finds that part of the picture “simple, if interesting,” before coming to the “four galloping wolves” that, for him, complicate the picture in a delightful way. Nicholas pays close attention to the tiny details on the tapestry and creates a story out of this picture. He enjoys imagining various scenarios for what will follow in the story of the huntsman and the approaching wolves, which shows how creative he is.

The tapestry is a symbol for the conflict between wildness (as represented by the wolves) and orderliness, represented by the huntsman. When Nicholas constructs a story out of this scene, he has a tendency to complicate the huntsman’s situation—by assuming that there must be more wolves than the four pictured, for example—suggesting that his sympathies lie with the wild animals.

☛ But there were other objects of delight and interest claiming his instant attention; there were quaint twisted candlesticks in the shape of snakes, and a teapot fashioned like a china duck, out of whose open beak the tea was supposed to come. How dull and shapeless the nursery teapot seemed in comparison!

**Related Characters:** The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 274

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nicholas makes his way into the lumber room, he discovers some unique household objects that he finds extremely intriguing. All these objects—like the snakes and duck in this example—have some connection to birds or animals, suggesting that the lumber room is a place of wildness when compared to the decorum of the rest of the

house. Nicholas, who is rebellious and wild himself, enjoys interacting with these objects.

He is struck by how the lumber room is filled with beautiful and interesting things while the aunt keeps the rest of the bland and boring. The duck-shaped teapot he sees is described in charming detail—"out of whose open beak the tea was supposed to come"—and it is contrasted with the "dull and shapeless" nursery teapot the children had to use. The aunt seems to intentionally keep these unusual items away from the children because she is opposed to imagination and creative thinking.

“Nicholas, Nicholas!” she screamed, “you are to come out of this at once. It’s no use trying to hide there; I can see you all the time.”

It was probably the first time for twenty years that anyone had smiled in that lumber-room.

**Related Characters:** The Aunt (speaker), Nicholas

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

The aunt has been standing guard at the entrance to the gooseberry garden, convinced that Nicholas would disobey her and make his way in there. But when she spends hours waiting for him to show up and he doesn't, she thinks he must have climbed over the wall and snuck into the garden without her seeing, so she goes inside the gooseberry garden to investigate. She screams his name as she searches the garden since she is angry and frustrated that she hasn't yet caught him. She clearly doesn't see him there, since Nicholas is inside the lumber room this whole time, but the aunt is desperate and tries to scare him into showing himself by claiming that she sees him. Nicholas hears her from inside the lumber room and is amused at her blatant lie, especially since she parades herself as a guardian of morality. No one has smiled in the lumber room for many years, suggesting that only stuffy adults have been in there but that Nicholas is bringing joy back into the place.

“Who’s calling?” he asked.

“Me,” came the answer from the other side of the wall; “didn’t you hear me? I’ve been looking for you in the gooseberry garden, and I’ve slipped into the rain-water tank. Luckily there’s no water in it, but the sides are slippery and I can’t get out. Fetch the little ladder from under the cherry tree—”

“I was told I wasn’t to go into the gooseberry garden,” said Nicholas promptly.

**Related Characters:** The Aunt, Nicholas (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nicholas is exploring the lumber room, he hears the aunt scream and call for help from the gooseberry garden, so he locks up and goes out to investigate. When he gets there, he asks, “Who’s calling?” even though he knows perfectly well that it is the aunt. Right from the beginning of this interaction, Nicholas seems to be feeling around for a way to put the aunt in her place and to leave without helping her. He is already forming the strategy he will use later, of pretending that the person in the water tank is not really the aunt. This highlights Nicholas’s quick thinking and careful planning. When the aunt speaks, she is stuck in the water tank and helpless, and yet the tone she uses with Nicholas is overbearing and rude. Nicholas cuts her off, saying he can’t help her because he was told he “wasn’t to go into the gooseberry garden.” He seems to enjoy using the aunt’s rule against her.

“Will there be strawberry jam for tea?” asked Nicholas innocently.

“Certainly there will be,” said the aunt, privately resolving that Nicholas should have none of it.

“Now I know that you are the Evil One and not aunt,” shouted Nicholas gleefully; “when we asked aunt for strawberry jam yesterday she said there wasn’t any. I know there are four jars of it in the store cupboard, because I looked, and of course you know it’s there, but she doesn’t, because she said there wasn’t any. Oh, Devil, you have sold yourself!”

**Related Characters:** The Aunt, Nicholas (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

The aunt has fallen into the water tank in the gooseberry garden and asks Nicholas to bring her a ladder so she can climb out. Nicholas pretends that he doesn't recognize the aunt's voice and that he thinks it is the "Evil One" tempting him to disobey the aunt's rule that he mustn't go into the gooseberry garden. To prove his claim, Nicholas cleverly traps the aunt—in order to defend herself against Nicholas's claim that she is the Devil, she would have to admit that she'd lied to the children about the strawberry jam the previous day. Nicholas guesses that the aunt would never admit to lying, and he is right—so he walks away without helping her. He manages to pull off this trick without being punished for it since the aunt cannot accuse him of wrongdoing without admitting to being a liar. Since the aunt comes across as a petty-minded hypocrite in the story, the names that Nicholas gives her—the "Evil One," and the "Devil"—seem apt. She deserves her time in the water tank (which is an underground pit, echoing Hell and a fitting home for the Devil).

●● As for Nicholas, he, too, was silent, in the absorption of one who has much to think about; it was just possible, he considered, that the huntsman would escape with his hounds while the wolves feasted on the stricken stag.

**Related Characters:** Nicholas's Brother, Girl-Cousin, Boy-Cousin, The Aunt, Nicholas

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of the story, the other children have returned from their disappointing trip to Jagborough and the aunt has been finally rescued from the water tank by a kitchen maid. They are having their tea in grumpy silence. While Nicholas is quiet, too, he doesn't share in their misery. He is happily preoccupied as he thinks about the tapestry he'd found in the lumber room. The magic of the lumber room still lingers around him, and it keeps him busy and cheerful even though he is surrounded by negativity. Nicholas is still trying to resolve the manner in which the situation of the huntsman and the wolves will end. Earlier, in the lumber room, he had decided that the huntsman was in a difficult spot and would likely not make it out, but he now revises this version to include the huntsman's escape. The story's concluding image of the feasting wolves suggests that Nicholas sees himself in these victorious wild beasts, but it also suggests that his aunt—the huntsman—will live to fight another battle over Nicholas' behavior.



## 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.

## THE LUMBER ROOM

The other children are going to the beach at Jagborough “as a special treat,” but Nicholas is not accompanying them because he is “in disgrace” and being punished. Earlier that morning, Nicholas had refused to eat his breakfast of “wholesome bread-and-milk,” claiming that there was a frog in it.

“Older and wiser and better people” told Nicholas not to “talk nonsense” since this was impossible, but there had indeed been a frog in his breakfast—he himself had picked it up from the garden and put it in his breakfast. He had to face a lengthy scolding for committing this “sin,” but what really stood out to Nicholas from this entire incident was that the grown-ups had been wrong when they’d said it was impossible for a frog to be in his food.

Now, as punishment for this naughty trick, Nicholas’s boy-cousin, girl-cousin, and “quite uninteresting younger brother” are all going to Jagborough without him. Nicholas’s cousins’ aunt, who, “by an unwarranted stretch of imagination,” claims to be Nicholas’s aunt as well, quickly came up with the idea of the trip just to punish Nicholas by excluding him from the fun. She often comes up with similar punishments—inventing fun activities from which to exclude the wrongdoers—when the children disobey her.

*The opening of the story sets Nicholas apart from the other children, suggesting that he is not only different from them but also more important and interesting. His claim about the frog in his food is strikingly absurd and immediately suggests that he has a creative mind. Since he is being punished, he clearly lives in an authoritarian household in which the adults have firm opinions about what is “wholesome” for the children.*



*Nicholas demonstrates that the social conventions adults believe in so firmly can be easily disrupted—they thought it was impossible for a frog to be in his breakfast, and he shows them that it is completely possible. He quite effortlessly sneaks a frog from the garden into his food, suggesting that it is not hard for the wild outside world to encroach into their seemingly orderly inside world. Nicholas doesn’t seem particularly bothered when the adults are unhappy with his behavior and he is delighted to point out when they are wrong, especially because they always seem so certain that they are right.*



*The other children and the aunt are identified by their relationships to Nicholas rather than by their names, which signifies his importance in the story. His younger brother is “quite uninteresting,” so he is likely not as imaginative and rebellious as Nicholas is. The aunt is his cousins’ aunt but insists that she is Nicholas’s aunt as well, a claim that Nicholas finds to be untrue and which sets the stage for the various lies that he will catch her in through the course of the story. In contrast to Nicholas’s expansive creative imagination, the aunt’s imagination is focused on lies and petty punishments, like inventing fun activities to exclude her disobedient charges from.*



The aunt expects Nicholas to cry when the other children leave for Jagborough, but he doesn't. Instead, the girl-cousin scrapes her knee and ends up crying loudly, to Nicholas's amusement. The aunt insists that she will forget about her pain and enjoy herself at Jagborough, and that the children will all have a great time playing on the sand. Nicholas informs the aunt that Bobby won't, since his boots are too tight. The aunt wonders why Bobby didn't mention his too-tight boots to her, to which Nicholas says that Bobby *did* tell her—twice—but that she hadn't listened. "You often don't listen when we tell you important things," Nicholas points out.

The aunt quickly changes the subject and tells Nicholas to stay out of the gooseberry garden. When he asks why, she simply tells him that he is "in disgrace." She then becomes suspicious that he will try to get into the garden just to disobey her. To catch him at it, she busies herself with "trivial gardening operations" in the front garden for a couple of hours, even though she has many other things to do. The aunt is "a woman of few ideas, with immense powers of concentration."

Nicholas comes out to the front garden a few times and approaches the two doors that lead out to the gooseberry garden "with obvious stealth of purpose," confirming the aunt's suspicions that he wants to get into the gooseberry garden. However, Nicholas has no desire to do this—he just wants the aunt to think he does so that she'll be on "self-imposed sentry-duty" and out of his way.

After ensuring that the aunt is busy guarding the entrance to the gooseberry garden, Nicholas goes inside the house and "rapidly put[s] into execution a plan of action that ha[s] long germinated in his brain," which is to enter **the lumber room**. After retrieving the key from a high shelf in the library, Nicholas slides it into the lock. He's been practicing unlocking doors for the past few days because "he [does] not believe in trusting too much to luck and accident." Nicholas opens the door to the "unknown land" that has up until this point been "carefully sealed from youthful eyes and concerning which no questions were ever answered."

Nicholas decides that "the large and dimly lit" room is everything he's dreamed it would be. It is a "storehouse of unimagined treasures" while the rest of the aunt's house is "bare and cheerless."

*The aunt's desire to see Nicholas in tears as a result of her punishment highlights her vindictive nature. Nicholas seems well aware of this and does not give her the satisfaction. The girl-cousin's little accident is an ominous beginning to a supposedly fun trip and suggests that it might not be as fun as the aunt hopes. The aunt is unaware of Bobby's tight boots, which shows that she doesn't pay much attention to the children or their needs. Nicholas portrays her as an inattentive caregiver.*



*When the aunt feels like her power over Nicholas is slipping because he is challenging her authority and pointing to her failings, she retaliates by heaping on another layer to his punishment by asking him to stay out of the gooseberry garden. She lingers in the garden to ensure that he obeys her, pretending to be busy there even though she has other work to do elsewhere, which emphasizes her petty and controlling nature.*



*Even though Nicholas has no intention of entering the gooseberry garden, he sneaks around suspiciously because he wants the aunt to stay outside and guard the doors to the garden. Thus, he cleverly manipulates her into doing exactly what he would like her to.*



*In addition to having a creative imagination, Nicholas is also a meticulous planner. He has carefully considered every detail while making his plan to enter the mysterious lumber room. The aunt refuses to even answer the children's questions about this locked room, which reveals the kind of relationship they share—she expects their unquestioning obedience at all times. Interestingly, the room that is veiled in such secrecy is only a lumber room (a room used to store unused furniture and knickknacks in old English houses). In the story, the room comes to symbolize a place of wildness and imagination, and the aunt's stern attempts to keep the children out of it emphasize that she wants to keep wildness and imagination out of their lives.*



*Nicholas notices that the aunt has stowed away many beautiful and quirky objects in the lumber room, which suggests that she keeps her house plain and boring in order to stifle the children's imaginations.*



Nicholas becomes transfixed by a **tapestry** that is meant to be a fire screen. To him, it looks like “a living, breathing story.” The tapestry depicts a scene in which a huntsman has shot a stag with an arrow while his two dogs charge at the animal. Meanwhile, unknown to the huntsman, four wolves head in his direction—to Nicholas, this is the detail that complicates the otherwise simple scene. He notices that the huntsman has only two arrows left in his quiver, and that he’d shot the stag at “ridiculously short range,” so he probably wasn’t a very skilled marksman. He guesses that there are most likely even more wolves approaching the huntsman from the shadows. Nicholas spends “many golden minutes” pondering the story of the tapestry and concludes that the huntsman and his dogs are in a tight spot.

Some of the other treasures that Nicholas finds include candlesticks shaped like snakes and a teapot shaped like a duck, compared to which the nursery teapot seems “dull and shapeless.” There is also a sandalwood box filled with brass figures of bulls, peacocks, and goblins, and a plain-looking black book filled with beautiful pictures of exotic birds.

Meanwhile, the aunt thinks that Nicholas must have climbed over a wall to enter the gooseberry garden, and she is looking for him there. She calls for him to come out of the gooseberry garden, claiming that she can see him. Nicholas, who is still inside **the lumber room**, smiles to himself when he hears her say this. It is “probably the first time for twenty years that anyone had smiled in that lumber-room.”

Soon after, Nicholas hears the aunt scream and then call out for someone to help her. He carefully locks up **the lumber room** and replaces the key in the library, and then goes out to the front garden to investigate. The aunt is calling his name from inside the gooseberry garden, and Nicholas asks, “Who’s calling?” The aunt replies that she has fallen into the empty rain water tank in the gooseberry garden and asks him to bring her a ladder so she can climb out. To this, Nicholas replies that he was told not to go into the gooseberry garden.

*Nicholas devotes a lot of time and attention to the tapestry. The hunting scene triggers his imagination, probably because he identifies with the conflict between wildness (as represented by the animals of the forest) and the huntsman’s actions to subdue the wild, which he likens with the controlling behavior of adults like the aunt. Nicholas closely observes the tapestry’s details and builds a story around the scene, which points to how observant and clever he is. Nicholas seems to enjoy the presence of the wolves in the tapestry and likes thinking that there are even more wolves than the four shown, and that the huntsman (a stand-in for his aunt) is therefore doomed.*



*The items in the lumber room that Nicholas finds fascinating have animals or birds on them, suggesting that this room is a place of wildness as opposed to the tameness of the rest of the house. The aunt seems to intentionally keep it this way, as evidenced by Nicholas’s comparison between the interesting duck-shaped teapot in the lumber room and the boring nursery teapot the children use.*



*The aunt grows desperate when she suspects that Nicholas has disobeyed her and evaded detection. When she says she can see him in the gooseberry garden, Nicholas is amused to catch her lying. He also knows that she’d be much more upset if she knew he was in the wild chaos of the lumber room rather than among the cultivated plants of the gooseberry garden.*



*It is a funny moment in the story when Nicholas saunters into the garden asking, “Who’s calling?”—he clearly knows it is the aunt. Nicholas thinks quickly and starts laying the foundation for his plan to not help her, and first does this by using the aunt’s order against her. She told him to stay out of the gooseberry garden, so he says he cannot go inside it to help her. He clearly enjoys having the upper hand while she is helpless in the water tank.*



When the aunt impatiently says that he can now go into the gooseberry garden, Nicholas replies that her voice doesn't sound like the aunt's and that he suspects it might be the "Evil One" tempting him to be disobedient. He says the aunt always said that Nicholas gave in to the Evil One's temptations but that this time he wouldn't.

The "prisoner in the tank" tells Nicholas not to "talk nonsense" and to bring the ladder. Nicholas asks if they would have strawberry jam with their tea, and the aunt says they certainly would. Nicholas then shouts that he is now sure it is the Evil One talking to him and not the aunt—the previous day, the aunt had said there was no strawberry jam when the children asked her for some. Nicholas had checked the store cupboard and knew there were four jars of jam, and the Evil One knew this, too, but the aunt must not have known since she said there wasn't any. Nicholas triumphantly says, "Oh, Devil, you have sold yourself!"

While Nicholas enjoys the luxury of talking to the aunt as if she were the "Evil One," he understands with "childish discernment" that he shouldn't push his luck in this conversation. So, he walks away, leaving the aunt stuck inside the water tank. Eventually, a kitchen maid finds the aunt and rescues her.

That evening, tea is a quiet and uncomfortable affair. The other children had not enjoyed themselves at Jagborough because the tide was high—"a circumstance that the aunt had overlooked in the haste of organising her punitive expedition." They hadn't been able to play on the sands, and Bobby's tight boots had put him in a grumpy mood. The aunt is upset after being stuck in the water tank for 35 minutes. Nicholas is quiet like the others, as well. He is thinking deeply about the **tapestry** he'd found in **the lumber room**, and thinks that the hunter might be able to escape with his dogs if he left the stag he'd killed for the wolves to feast on.

*Nicholas builds on the idea that he doesn't know who is talking to him from inside the water tank and he goes on to claim that he thinks it is the "Evil One," or in other words, the Devil. This is a brave claim to make against the strict aunt, but Nicholas builds his case well. He once again uses the aunt's words—this time, it is that he always gives in when the Evil One tempts him—to refuse to help her.*



*Nicholas cleverly lays a trap for the aunt when he asks about the strawberry jam. He knows that the aunt lied to the children about the jam, and he shows her that he knows this. The aunt is left in a difficult situation because the only way for her to claim she is not the Devil is to admit she'd lied about the jam earlier, and this would destroy her façade of being "older and wiser and better" than the children. The aunt's lie about the strawberry jam is very petty, especially since she has not one but four jars of jam in storage. She seems to take joy in denying the children small pleasures and insisting they eat the bland "bread-and-milk" she offers them. Her lies and small-mindedness suggest that Nicholas is justified when he calls her the Devil.*



*In addition to his wildly rebellious behavior and flights of imagination, Nicholas demonstrates that he also possesses sound practical judgment by walking away from this interaction while he still has the upper hand.*



*In contrast to Nicholas's meticulous planning of every trick he pulls off, the aunt's plan to send the children to Jagborough was hurried and sloppy. Nicholas turns out to be right when he predicted that Bobby's boots would prevent him from having fun. While the aunt seethes in silence at having been stuck in the water tank, she is unable to scold or punish Nicholas for not helping her because of the clever way he manipulated their conversation. While the rest of the family has their tea in collective misery, Nicholas is happily preoccupied as he is thinking about the tapestry. He is coming up with another solution for the problem of the huntsman and the wolves. In this new scenario, the huntsman and his dogs might escape if they leave the stag to the wolves—so the wild creatures get to feast while the bumbling huntsman runs for his life. Nicholas foresees a happy ending for the wolves that he seems to identify with.*





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