This essay explores how three writers active in the Edwardian period represent childish bad behaviour. Despite their obvious differences of genre and approach, Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, and Saki (Hector Hugh Munro) share an interest in bad or naughty characters, adult and child. These characters are driven by a fierce internal logic that cuts across social convention and the needs or desires of other characters: particularly when they write about children, Potter, Grahame, and Saki characterize bad behaviour as wild, natural, and even honest. They do this by associating wildness with animal behaviour; in doing so, they draw on Romantic ideals of the child's purity and honesty (in the face of corrupt adult society), as well as ideals of animality. The term ‘beastly’ is thus useful here. Bad behaviour can be termed ‘beastly,’ in the sense of ‘acting in any manner unworthy of a reasonable creature,’ but it can also simply mean ‘resembling a beast in conduct, or in obeying the animal instincts’ (OED). Beastly children and childlike beasts live ruthlessly, pay heed only to what they want, are inconsiderate of the wants of those around them, and cause trouble. However troublesome to adults this behaviour might be, it underscores the natural and original qualities of idealized childhood, in stark opposition to the corruption and mixed motives of the adult world.

A word here about the choice of writers. Saki wrote for adults, with a sardonic maliciousness that is absent from the children’s books of Potter and Grahame. But their works bear comparison because they show the ruthless child from the perspectives of adult and child readers, and
demonstrate that understanding Edwardian ideas about childhood requires one to examine children as they appear in works by adults for adults, as well as those for children. They also demonstrate a peculiarly Edwardian nostalgia for rural England and a distaste for the city and post-industrial society. This nostalgia for pastoral life underscores the affection for animals and children that can be seen in their work, be it satirical and savage (as in Saki), gently nostalgic (as in Grahame), or delicately ironic (as in Potter).

Saki’s child characters act with an ‘inexorable child logic’ (‘The Penance,’ 426) that shocks, but also silences and awes adult characters. To underscore their wildness, or their kinship with the natural world, Saki shows them using, and associating with, animals in ways that show their purity of ruthlessness and expose the muddled and compromised nature of adult life. The ruthless child protagonists of Saki can best be seen in his two stories ‘Sredni Vashtar’ (1910) and ‘The Penance,’ (1910). The boy animals of three of Beatrix Potter’s tales: The Tale of Peter Rabbit (1902), The Tale of Tom Kitten (1907), and The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin (1903), act with a similar fierceness of desire and disregard for adult rules, as do the young animals of Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind in the Willows (1908), in particular, Portly Otter.

These beastly children are notable for a fierce internal logic that makes almost no reference to the adult world and its rules: in other words, they do exactly what they want to do, without consulting others. But what might be represented as selfishness by earlier or later writers, is used here to reveal how disappointing and muddled adult life is; beastly children’s ‘naughty’ actions promise to cut through this mediocrity and provide a truthful, though possibly brutal, new way of doing things. As we shall see, however, though their fictional children symbolize the new and the original, Grahame, Potter and Saki draw on Victorian and Romantic ideas about childhood, and show their radical children at work in nostalgic natural settings. At the same time, this natural setting and the association of children and their unrepentant bad behaviour with animals marks them out as peculiarly Edwardian.

Saki’s children are not literally animals (unlike any of Potter’s and Grahame’s characters). But they are strongly associated with animals, and ally themselves with animals, setting themselves against a set of mediocre late-Victorian adults. The bleak ‘Sredni Vashtar’ tells of Conradin, a sickly ten-year-old orphan boy, who lives with the despicable Mrs De Ropp:

Mrs De Ropp was Conradin’s cousin and guardian, and in his eyes she represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and