

IF
BY

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A Critical Appreciation

POET'S INTRODUCTION

- Kipling had a close connect with India which shaped many of his poems. Born as Joseph Rudyard Kipling (30 December 1865 - 18 January 1936) in India, he was an English journalist, short-story writer, poet, and novelist.
- Kipling's works of fiction include *The Jungle Book* (1894), *Kim* (1901), and many short stories, including "The Man who would be king (1888). His poems include "Mandalay" (1890), "Gunga Din" (1890), "The Gods of the Copybook Headings" (1919), "The White Man's Burden" (1899), and "If—" (1910). He is seen as an innovator in the art of the short story. His children's books are classics; one critic noted "a versatile and luminous narrative gift."

POET'S INTRODUCTION (CONT)

- Rudyard Kipling is one of the best-known of the late Victorian poets and story-tellers. Although he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907, his political views, which grew more toxic as he aged, have long made him critically unpopular. In the *New Yorker*, Charles McGrath remarked “Kipling has been variously labelled a colonialist, a jingoist, a racist, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a right-wing imperialist warmonger; and—though some scholars have argued that his views were more complicated than he is given credit for—to some degree he really was all those things. That he was also a prodigiously gifted writer who created works of inarguable greatness hardly matters anymore, at least not in many classrooms, where Kipling remains politically toxic.” However, Kipling’s works for children, above all his novel *The Jungle Book*, first published in 1894, remain part of popular cultural through the many movie versions made and remade since the 1960s.

MAIN POINTS

- ◉ *If* is an inspirational poem that provides advice on how one should live one's life. The poem takes the reader through various ways in which the reader can rise above adversity that will almost certainly be thrown one's way at some point in one's lives.
- ◉ Throughout the poem, the speaker gives the reader multiple scenarios, both positive and negative, along with a glimpse into how one should conduct oneself. The poem has an almost mathematical proof about it with its if-then scenario. Kipling leaves the "then" until the final two lines, revealing to the reader that if he or she is able to do all that was just mentioned, he or she will not only have the world at his or her fingertips, but he or she will also be a "Man."

STANZA WISE ANALYSIS

- Rudyard Kipling separates his poem into four stanzas of equal length; each stanza contains eight lines. Each stanza has a set rhyme scheme of ababcdcd, with the exception of the first stanza, which has the following rhyme scheme: aaaabcbcb. In terms of meter, the poem is written in iambic pentameter, with five feet consisting of a stressed and then an unstressed syllable. The speaker of the poem, presumably Kipling, keeps a positive and upbeat tone throughout the work, informing the reader what he or she needs to do in order to be a successful person in life. Kipling makes this a very personal poem by his use of the pronoun “you.” In fact, one could even interpret that the poem is Kipling talking to himself or giving himself a pep-talk.

FIRST STANZA

- ◉ The first stanza wastes no time in setting up the if-then scenario. Kipling writes, “If you can keep your head when all about you/Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...”. Kipling reminds the reader of the importance of maintaining a level head even when those around the reader are losing their nerve and blaming the situation on the reader. The reader soon realizes the poem is really one long sentence. The third and fourth lines present the next “if” situation. Kipling writes, “If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,/But make allowance for their doubting too...” Here, the speaker emphasizes two traits that all people must possess: self-trust and the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others, even if that means understanding that people will not always like or agree with you. In the final four lines of the first stanza, Kipling writes:
 - ◉ If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise...
 - ◉ In these lines, the speaker is telling the reader to have patience. Even if he or she is lied about, he or she should not stoop to the level of a liar. If he or she is hated, he or she must not become hateful, and finally, the reader should not appear to be better than he or she actually is, nor should he or she talk in a manner that does not reflect who they are morally or spiritually.

SECOND STANZA

“If” clauses continue into the second stanza.

Here, Kipling urges his reader to dream and think, but to not get so caught up in dreams and thoughts that the reader loses his grasp on reality. Kipling uses personification in his next two lines:

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Kipling’s diction here is also worth mentioning. The word impostor suggests a pretence or disguise. Perhaps he uses this word to showcase the fleeting nature of both: success never stays, nor does disaster. Additionally, he could possibly be suggesting that with these two words often comes a disruption or change. In any case, the reader should not dwell too much on either triumph or disaster because they will soon disappear. Kipling continues right on to his next “if” clause:

SECOND STANZA (CONT)

- The speaker informs the reader that he or she must be able to endure hearing his or her words being twisted by dishonest and harmful people in order to serve their own agendas. He continues this thought in the last two lines of the stanza, speaking of the importance of being able to pick oneself up and start again if they fail—even if the thing they've failed at has taken all of their life to attempt. The reader must always be prepared to start again.

THIRD STANZA

- ◉ The theme in these lines is very similar to the one in the last two lines of the previous stanza: if you lose everything, you must be willing to begin again. Not only that, but you must also be willing to forget about the loss and not dwell on it.
- ◉ In the next four lines, the speaker is imploring the reader to endure, even if that feels both physically (sinew) and emotionally (heart and nerve) impossible. It is also worth noting the capitalization of “Will.” Perhaps Kipling wanted to emphasize the resilience of the human spirit here by making it a power that is separate from the person who possesses it.

FOURTH STANZA

- ◉ In the fourth stanza, the consequence of doing all of these “ifs” is finally revealed, but not before Kipling presents us with three more scenarios. The first one deals with how to treat others, regardless of their station in life. It should not matter with whom the reader is walking; he or she needs to treat the lowest of the low and the highest in society exactly the same: with kindness. Kipling then dives right into the next “if”: Kipling reminds his reader that it is important to be able to bounce back from disappointment or pain. One must not dwell on his enemies or the hurt a loved one could potentially cause. Finally, the poet gives the reader his final piece of advice: He tells his reader to never give up or waste even a single second of time. If you are given a minute, make sure you use all sixty seconds of it. Finally, in the last two lines, the outcome of abiding by all of these pieces of counsel is revealed: If one is able to keep all of these things in check, one will have the world at one’s fingertips.

MAIN THEMES

- ◎ **Stoicism** - the acknowledgment that, whilst you cannot always prevent bad things from happening to you, you *can* deal with them in a good way. This is summed up well in the referencing to meeting with triumph and disaster and ‘treat[ing] those two impostors just the same’ - in other words, be magnanimous in victory and success (don’t gloat or crow about it) and be dignified and noble in defeat or times of trouble (don’t moan or throw your toys out of the pram). A phrase that is often used in discussion or analysis of ‘If—’ is ‘stiff upper lip’, that shorthand for the typically English quality of reserve and stoicism in the face of disaster. It’s almost a code to live by, a mantra - or, as one poet suggested, a distillation of the *Bhagavad Gita* into English. An extract from ‘If—’ is inscribed above the tennis players’ entrance at Wimbledon.

MAIN THEMES

- ◉ **Manhood** - For Kipling, a true product of the Victorian era with its stringent gender binaries, manhood meant several key characteristics; these included honesty, humility, perseverance, courage, stoicism, and, in many cases, fighting prowess. His men are willing to endure toil and strife and surmount terrible odds. They find glory in the pursuit of the British Empire's goals, whether on the battlefield or in the bureaucracy. They are the strong and silent type with a stiff upper lip. Kipling did not believe, though, that violence or pride or rage were good characteristics for the ideal man to possess; he also believed that they could be men of feelings and emotions, as long as those did not get in the way of their endeavors, whatever they might be. Kipling's men rule over their inferiors - women, children, native peoples - with a firm but kind, albeit patronizing, hand. Today, his writings are considered sexist, racist, and imperialist.