

1. "If" by Rudyard Kipling

POET

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Rudyard Kipling is a famous English short story writer who also wrote poetry. His most famous work is "The Jungle Book". He was highly acclaimed and celebrated during his own lifetime, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907.

He was born in Bombay in India where his father was a professor at the School of Art. Although Kipling went to school in England, he returned to Lahore, where his father had become the curator of the museum, when he was 16. Kipling became assistant editor of a small local newspaper, the "Civil and Military Gazette". In his role as a journalist, Kipling gained knowledge of the lives of the Indians and the British living abroad. He turned these experiences into many short stories and novels.

When his writing took off, Kipling left India to return to London and devote his time to fiction. He married and travelled to America where he met other famous writers. He eventually settled with his family in Devon, England, where he wrote prolifically.

BACKGROUND

The poem was first published in 1910 and is addressed to Kipling's son, John. Kipling's son died in 1915 at the Battle of Loos during the First World War. He was just eighteen years old.

The poem was inspired by Kipling's admiration for Leander Starr Jameson. Jameson was a Scottish politician who fought to colonise Africa. He led an infamous uprising, called the Jameson raid, in which he tried to gather British expatriate workers in South Africa to fight against the Boer (or Dutch-speaking) population which ran the country. The raid failed and Jameson was arrested and put on trial in South Africa. Back home in England, the press and the people hailed him as a hero for trying to snatch the country back from the Boers. Jameson was sent to prison for 15 months. Upon his release, he became Prime Minister of Cape Colony in South Africa.

Kipling was introduced to Jameson by his friend Cecil Rhodes. Rhodes was a British businessman who had founded the country of Rhodesia in southern Africa. Rhodes colonised this African territory, exploiting its natural resources and making himself a very wealthy man. Rhodesia has now been returned to its indigenous people and is Zimbabwe and Zambia. Kipling was a great believer in British Empire. This was the political practice of the British taking over territories abroad, governing their peoples, and taking their wealth and resources. By 1922, the British Empire was made up of 458 million people, and covered a quarter of the planet. It made Britain very wealthy and powerful.

The poem is inspired by the activities of men like Jameson whom Kipling felt encapsulated what it means to be a British man. The qualities he prizes most in the poem are humility or not being boastful, and stoicism or enduring hardship without making a fuss.

SUMMARY

The poem is a father's advice to his son on how to be a great British man.

ANALYSIS

The poem is a direct address from a father to his son, explaining the qualities which will make the boy a fine man. It is written in the second person, like an instruction manual, speaking to "you" Kipling's son and the reader. Explicitly, the poem is Kipling's words to his son, John. However, it was inspired by Kipling's friend Leander Starr Jameson.

The poem is structured as one long sentence with every line flowing on to the next. This perpetual enjambment creates a sense of pace, urgency and dynamism. This gives the poem the feeling that something important is being said which must be heard. The poem is didactic. This means that it is meant to instruct and educate. Kipling is trying to educate his son, and also the reader, to recognise and aspire to becoming a British gentleman. The poem is constructed around four stanzas, each with eight lines. There is an organised rhyme scheme of ABABCDCD which again gives the poem great pace and direction.

The poem is entitled "If". The word "If" at the beginning of a sentence forms a conditional. Conditional sentences describe known facts and their consequences. The poem is therefore a list of statements which pose a series of conditions or circumstances. The consequence of those circumstances is held back until the final line of the entire poem. This gives the poem a sense of drama and anticipation. The reader is waiting to find out what will be the consequence if they behave in the way described by the poet. The final line of the poem builds to the crescendo that the individual who can fulfil all these circumstances will be a "Man".

The first stanza begins with the word "If". The word forms a refrain throughout the poem, being repeated at the beginning of most lines. Because the word "if" here begs the question 'is it possible', its repetition keeps forcing the reader to think about whether or not they can live up to the circumstances or conditions described in the poem. It sets us a challenge which we feel we should meet.

The first stanza begins with a metaphor of calm. The image "keep your head" suggests that real men are able not to lose control and panic, losing your head means becoming out of rational control. The poet explains that a man must not only be calm every day, he must especially be calm when others are "losing" their heads and "blaming it on you". Immediately, the reader is given a picture of a calm and able man who is not flustered by others panicking and who has broad enough shoulders not to care if others try to shift responsibility on to him.

The poet goes on to explain that you are a man "If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you". This captures the idea of self-belief. Kipling is saying that a real man always sticks with his own judgement and is confident in his abilities. However, this man does not care if others doubt him. Instead he makes "allowance" or excuses for those around him too foolish to appreciate him.

The next circumstance which makes you a man is being able to "wait and not be tired" and to avoid lying when others lie about you, and avoid hating when others hate you. In the final line of the stanza, Kipling says a real man should not "look too good, nor talk too wise". This is interesting. He is suggesting that the model of masculinity does not show off to others or try to impress. This quiet stoicism is part of the stereotype of the British gentleman who has a 'stiff upper lip'. This means that he does not complain even when things go badly for him.

The second stanza moves on from the times when things go wrong, to thoughts of ambition. It begins with the conditional idea "If you can dream – and not make dreams your master". Here the idea of dreams means ambitions and aspirations. It is suggesting that ambition is an important thing. However, the poet does not think a real man ever loses control, so he does not allow ambition to drive him. Kipling imagines the dreams as a person becoming the boss or "master"; a real man would never allow this to happen. He goes on to say that men should be able to "think – and not make thoughts your aim". This is very telling. Kipling is saying that thoughts are vital, but they should not be your only goal. He believes that actions and doing things are more important than thinking. Again this is part of the model of practical masculinity which formed the basis of the British Empire.

Kipling goes on to explain that while a real man is ambitious, he must know how to deal with failure. He says that it is vital to "meet with Triumph and Disaster...just the same". Here he personifies success and failure and imagines a meeting with them. He says that you must learn to greet each of them in the same way. Therefore you will be as unfazed by success as you are by failure. You will take it all in your stride. Interestingly, Kipling calls success and failure "two impostors". An impostor is someone who pretends to be someone they are not in order to deceive you. Kipling is highlighting the way that success and failure are never really what you think they are; they both have hidden drawbacks which mean that we should neither be too excited or too disappointed by outcomes.

The poet goes on to imagine the sort of determination one must have to listen to your own words being "twisted by knaves". A knave is an old-fashioned or archaic name for a dishonest person. Kipling concludes the stanza by explaining that determination must be shown when a man watches the "things you gave your life to, broken". In this circumstance a man will "build 'em up with worn-out tools". This is a metaphor comparing success with building something and failure with the destruction of that building. He imagines a real man as a builder who is prepared to return to a broken house and begin again without complaining if disaster hits. Again, Kipling's imagery is practical and masculine. It is about making something.

Stanza three moves on to ideas of taking risks and being daring which are part of Kipling's stereotype of masculinity. The first metaphor comes from gambling. He imagines a man able to risk his life being like a gambler willing to "heap" his winnings "And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss". This is a gambling game of luck. Therefore a man will be prepared to risk his life for the toss of a coin. However, Kipling's point continues. It is not just the risk which is manly, it is the ability to deal with loss and never "breathe a word about" it which is important. This shows stoicism and a sense of proportion. The poet goes on to imagine other dangerous situations a man might face. He states a man must be able to "force your heart and nerve and sinew". The polysyndeton or repeated use of "and" to connect the list here emphasizes all the details necessary to make a man. Importantly, a man is made not only of heart, meaning emotion, but also of "nerve" which is associated with bravery, and "sinew" which means muscle and implies physical power. It is these qualities which a man must have when all others have given up. A real man remains because his "Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'" Thus a man has a greater "Will" or sense of sheer determination which will make him persist when others give up.

In the final stanza, Kipling deals with the way a man should have relationships with others. He begins by saying that a man must “talk with crowds and keep your virtue”. This means a man must be able to speak to the masses but not be influenced by their poor behaviour. It assumes that ordinary people are not as virtuous or moral as a real man. Kipling then says a man must “walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch”. Therefore a great man knows how to speak to kings and still be a normal person; he must not become too arrogant or superior because of the elevated people he knows.

Kipling goes on to say that a man should not be able to be “hurt” by “foes nor loving friends”. This suggests that a man is impervious to emotional pain caused by enemies and lovers. This means a man must not have a deep emotional investment in others. Kipling develops this idea of being emotionally cut off when he says “If all men count with you, but none too much”. This means you should pay equal attention to individuals and never favour one person over another. The word “count” comes from mathematics and suggests that a man measures others equally. This is a very rational way of dealing with individuals.

Now the poet moves on to building to the conclusion of his point. He introduces a clever metaphor for life as a journey of one minute. The “unforgiving minute” is the length of time that life feels like. It is brief and it is “unforgiving” because it will not give you a second more or less even if you beg for it. Therefore life is short. In this brief life a real man will fill his minute with “sixty seconds worth of distance”. In other words, he will use up all his time on earth by running forward and doing things; he will never stop or idle. This shows that a man must seize his life and make the most of it.

Kipling explains that if his son can do all the things he has just listed then “Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it”. Therefore with these qualities a man can look forward to owning the world; he can be a master of his planet. The character traits Kipling has just taught will lead to worldly success.

The final line begins with “And”. This is a conjunction which should join two sentences together. Here it joins all the circumstances listed in the poem to the final fact that is their consequence – that they will make a boy a man. Importantly, Kipling uses the phrase “which is more”. This means he thinks mastering the world is less important than the fact his boy will be a “Man”. The word man is given a capital letter to show that it is a crucial concept. It is an important quality in itself and not just a gender.

The poem ends with the very personal phrase “my son!” This brings us back to the fact that this is fatherly advice meant for his son that we are eavesdropping on. The exclamation mark which ends the entire sentence of the poem shows the emotion which the poet has expressed here. He is triumphant and excited that his son is going to be a great man.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“Prayer Before Birth” – provides useful comparisons with the poem as they are both about a cruel world. However, Kipling sees it as brave and admirable to face it, while MacNeice suggests it is better not to encounter life at all.

“Search for my Tongue” – provides useful comparisons as both poems are about what makes a person who they are.

“Piano” – provides useful comparisons. Both poems are about a son’s relationship with a parent.

“Poem at Thirty Nine” – provides useful comparisons. Both poems are about a parent-child relationship which has been very influential.

“Do not go gentle into that good night” – provides useful comparisons as it is about the advice a son gives to his father. It is therefore the reverse of Kipling’s poem.