# If Study Guide

## If by Rudyard Kipling

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# Contents

# Introduction

Rudyard Kipling's "If" is perhaps his most famous poem. Kipling composed the poem in 1909 while living in Great Britain. It was first published in 1910 in Kipling's collection of children's stories, *Rewards and Fairies*, as a companion piece to the story "Brother Square Toes," which is an account of George Washington and his presidency during the French Revolution. The placement of the didactic poem after "Brother Square Toes" in the collection serves to distill a specific lesson from the story for its young readers.

"If" attracted immediate nationwide attention in Britain, and it was quickly adopted as a popular anthem. In the *Kipling Journal*, C. E. Carrington relates Kipling's own words of subtle displeasure regarding the unexpected rampant popularity of the poem:

Among the verses in *Rewards* . . . was one set called "If," which escaped from the book, and for a while ran about the world . . . Once started, the mechanization of the age made them snowball themselves in a way that startled me . . . Twenty-seven of the Nations of the Earth translated them into their seven-and-twenty tongues, and printed them on every sort of fabric.

"If" is a didactic poem, a work meant to give instruction. In this case, "If" serves as an instruction in several specific traits of a good leader. Kipling offers this instruction not through listing specific characteristics, but by providing concrete illustrations of the complex actions a man should or should not take which would reflect these characteristics.

In modern times, "If" remains widely anthologized and is regarded as a popular classic of English literature, not necessarily for a display of artistry but for its familiarity and inspiration.

# Author Biography

Poet, novelist, and short-story writer Rudyard Kipling, the first English writer to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, was the most popular literary figure of his time. He was born December 30, 1865, in Bombay, India, to John Lockwood Kipling and Alice MacDonald Kipling. John, who was a teacher of architecture and an artist, inspired the character of the Keeper of the Wonder House in Kipling's novel *Kim* (1901).

Kipling spent his early childhood in India and was cared for by a Hindu nanny; as a young child he spoke Hindi. However, as was the custom of the time, at the age of five Kipling was sent to boarding school in Britain, where he was subjected to severe strictness and bullying. His poor eyesight kept him from advancing into a military career, so at the age of sixteen, Kipling returned to his parents in Lahore, India, and began his career as a journalist, first at the *Civil and Military Gazette* (1882—1887) and then as a worldwide correspondent for the *Pioneer* (1887—1889), a newspaper in Allahabad, India. His work became quite popular, especially his satirical and humorous verse. When he returned to England in 1889, he was already regarded as a national literary hero.

In 1892, Kipling married an American, Caroline Balestier, and moved to Vermont. Their two daughters, Josephine□who died at the age of six from pneumonia□and Elsie, were born in Vermont. The Kiplings returned to England in 1896; their only son, John, was born later that year. From that time on, the Kiplings remained based in England, though they regularly continued to travel around the world.

Kipling was a prolific writer whose work encompassed novels, children's stories, essays, and poetry, and he remained intensely popular with the common readership even though much of his verse and essays were scathingly political. His children's stories and his poetry have remained popular into the twenty-first century. "If" first appeared in his children's book *Rewards and Fairies*, published in 1910. Perhaps his most famous poem, "If" is addressed to a young boy and was written for his young son, John, as an instruction in becoming an upright and good man. John was killed almost a decade later, in 1915, during battle in World War I. John's death was an irreparable blow to Kipling and was one cause of Kipling's eventual decrease in productivity.

Kipling's skill at storytelling, his immensely readable and songlike verse, his refusal to mince words, and the strong sense of British patriotism that characterized his work made him immensely popular with the common readership. However, his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1907 was met with disapproval from literary critics and writers, who considered him vulgar and lacking in craftsmanship.

Kipling died January 18, 1936, in London, following an intestinal hemorrhage. He was survived by his wife and his daughter Elsie. His body was cremated and his ashes were buried in Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey.

Among Kipling's best known works are his novels *Kim* (1901), *Captains Courageous* (1897), *The Jungle Book* (1894), and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895), and his poems "White Man's Burden" (1899) and "Recessional" (1897).

# Plot Summary

## Stanza 1

The first stanza of "If" illustrates the practice of self-confidence and expresses that, in being confident, the reader must have the courage to face unpopularity and disagreement. This stanza also, however, advises against a self-confidence that does not allow for the consideration of opposing ideas. In exhorting the reader to both ignore doubt and make allowance for doubt (lines 3 and 4), Kipling creates a paradox (the combination of mutually exclusive ideas that, while seemingly contradictory, serve to make a point in their contradiction) that is characteristic of the tone of the entire poem.

Line 5 advises patience, line 6 advises honesty, and line 7 advises fortitude of character. These three lines, along with the first four lines of the poem, share a common thread: they provide instruction in the maintenance of righteous behavior in the face of unrighteousness. However, in line 8, Kipling is quick to qualify his advice, telling the reader "yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise." That is, in behaving righteously, a person must avoid self-righteousness.

The meter of the first stanza moves along at a set and predictable pace. If it were to be read aloud, the smooth pace of the regular meter would reflect a quietness of tone□a tone that reflects the humility Kipling seems to be advocating in the last two lines of stanza 1.

## Stanza 2

The second stanza employs variations in the meter. C. E. Carrington, in an essay on the poem for the *Kipling Journal*, writes of line 12 in particular: "The reader finds his voice rising with a sort of indignation to a climax at the words *those two imposters*. (Read this line as an iambic pentameter and you kill it dead.)" As Carrington notes, the consecutive stressed syllables here are jarring in their phrasing, serving to add heated emotion. Such a minor climax is appropriate for this stanza, which warns the reader of the impermanence of both success and failure and the potential for an individual's thoughts and dreams, once made public, to be put to ill use by others.

The first two lines (9 and 10) of stanza 2 exhort the reader to find a balance between private ideals and public action, warning against making the machinations of the mind an end in itself. In other words, to be a leader an individual must be able to put private dreams and philosophies to public action. However, as in the first stanza, Kipling creates a contradiction by warning what can happen when ideals and philosophies are brought into the public arena. As noted in line 1, private thoughts, once made public, can be "twisted" away from their original meaning. The central focus of this second stanza is to instruct the reader to act on his ideals and to warn the reader at the same

time that action does not guarantee permanent success. The nature of ideals in action is concretely illustrated in lines 15 and 16 as hard, continuous labor.

## Stanza 3

The third stanza is characterized by hyperbole, or the use of exaggeration as a literary device. After establishing in the second stanza that both "Triumph" and "Disaster" are impermanent by nature, the first quatrain (four lines) of stanza 3 advises detachment from both. Kipling makes a recommendation to "make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss" in order to illustrate the complete detachment with which an individual should regard both profit and loss, neither of which is permanent.

At the same time, a very sharp contrast is made to this illustration of detachment in the ensuing four lines, which offer the equally strong exhortation to "Hold on!" As with earlier contradictions, this contradiction is done purposefully, a literary technique known as "paradox." It is Kipling's point not that fine leadership asks the impossible□that is, to simultaneously espouse contradictory behaviors and traits□but that model leadership requires action that is based on a worldview that is complex, multifaceted, and ultimately inclusive.

## Stanza 4

The recommendation to the reader toward inclusiveness is further reflected in the last stanza, which advises, in the first two lines, to "talk with crowds" and not "lose the common touch" even when aspiring toward transcendence of commonality. The third and fourth lines go further, recommending against favoritism and toward regarding men with equality.

The entire poem, as evidenced by the title, is an extended "if/then" statement; and the last line serves as the answer to every "if" presented in the poem: by emulating the characteristics of a model leader, an individual can achieve "manhood." The reader learns at this point that the poem is meant as a specific address to a boy or young man. That the achievement of "manhood" is directly associated with the characteristics and actions of a model leader reveals a societal attitude toward gender that excludes women from the realm of public leadership.

In the *Kipling Journal*, Carrington writes of the poem's last line: "Hostile critics have made light of the final couplet, when the poet seems to descend from high consideration of ethics, and to drop to a final slangy compliment." Carrington is quick to point out that the poem must be considered in light of the circumstances of its original publication, which reveals its purpose. The poem is part of the children's story collection *Rewards and Fairies*, and thus the final line can be seen as an appropriately affectionate address from an older mentor to a young boy.

# Themes

## Manhood and Leadership

"If" was originally written as a companion piece to the children's story "Brother Square Toes," a story about George Washington's presidency during the French Revolution. The story portrays the character of George Washington as a model leader and was meant to illustrate to children the virtues of an exemplary public figure. "If" was placed immediately after this story in order to distill the lessons of the story; the poem also offers a lesson in the characteristics and virtues of a model public figure or leader.

However, as evidenced in the last line of "If," the poem is not addressed to all children but specifically to boys. The poem therefore creates a mutual inclusiveness between the attainment of true manhood and the abilities and virtues of a true leader. This inclusiveness, by its very nature, excludes women, reflecting the attitude of early twentieth century society toward women. At the time, women were not allowed to vote, hold public office, own property, or have an independent career.

## Righteousness versus Self-Righteousness

The first stanza of the poem exhorts the reader to be patient, honest, and forthright, especially when faced with opposition and temptation to act in a less virtuous manner. This call to righteous behavior is qualified by the last line of the stanza, however, which advises an individual, "don't look too good, nor talk too wise." In other words, an individual must not appear self-righteous in his effort to emulate righteous behavior.

## Strong Work Ethic

Praise of a strong work ethic is echoed throughout the poem, as is a warning against idleness, exemplified in lines 29 and 30: "If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run." The third stanza also reflects an idealization of hard work by exhorting the reader to "force your heart and nerve and sinew / To serve your turn long after they are gone."

The poem also places higher value on the ability to *act* than on the ability to *philosophize*, as reflected in lines 9 and 10: "If you can dream□and not make dreams your master; / If you can think□and not make thoughts your aim." An exemplary life is portrayed as one that is lived as an act of continuous hard work, during which time an individual should be prepared to constantly "stoop" to rebuild "with worn-out tools" the work to which an individual's life has been devoted. This recommendation of a strong work ethic reflects a markedly Western, Protestant idealization of hard work and its progress as ennobling and godly, a view of work and progress that eventually contributed to the rise of industrialization and capitalism in the West.

## Detachment

The first quatrain of stanza 3 advises the reader to be able to "make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss" and to "lose, and start again at your beginnings, / And never breathe a word about your loss." This hyperbolic (exaggerated) instruction serves to illustrate the impermanent reality of both success and failure, and thus the futility of seeking success, particularly material success, as a goal. A detachment from material success is illustrated here as an ideal virtue.

## The Middle Way

Throughout the poem, Kipling illustrates ideal behavior and virtue through the use of paradox: righteousness without self-righteousness; detachment while practicing determination; and high-breeding blended with commonality. This paradox is illustrated in the following lines: "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, / Or walk with Kings□nor lose the common touch." The employment of these contradictory extremes throughout the poem serves to illustrate a central theme of striving for an idealized "golden mean" in all facets of life. This strong emphasis on balance possibly reflects a Buddhist influence on Kipling's own life philosophy, as a basic teaching of Buddhism is the quest for what is known as the Middle Way□a quest for balance in the search for spiritual enlightenment.

# Style

## Iambic Pentameter and Rhyme

"If" is written in iambic pentameter, a form readers of Shakespeare will be familiar with, as the bard most often wrote in this style. Iambic pentameter consists of lines of five "feet" (two-syllable units) formed from an initial unstressed syllable and a second stressed syllable, as in the word "because." The eleven-syllable lines each end with an extra, unstressed syllable.

The poem is also written in four stanzas of eight rhyming lines, according to the pattern abab cdcd. "If" takes its name from the repetition of the word "if" at the start of the "a" and "c" lines, each of which comprise eleven syllables. The "b" and "d" lines each contain ten syllables.

## Didacticism

The main aim of "If" is to instruct a young man in what Kipling considers the virtues of model leadership and exemplary manhood. To serve an instructive end, the poem has been written in what is known as a "didactic" tone, reminiscent of a sermon. The poem is structured as a list of several short pieces of advice of varying lengths, a structure reminiscent of a familiar piece of didactic literature in the Western canon, the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. This resonance with the Book of Proverbs serves to underscore the poem's similar message of righteousness.

## Paradox

A paradox is a statement that is contradictory but that, in its contrariness, makes a point. "If" is filled with paradox, typically advising the reader toward two extremes of behavior. For example, the fourth stanza advises the ability to "walk with Kings□nor lose the common touch" and to allow "all men count with you, but none too much." Perhaps the most extreme paradox appears in the third stanza, demanding the ability to part with all acquisitions and successes without attachment but simultaneously to have the "Will" to "Hold on!" Kipling uses pairings of extremes to illustrate the complexity that virtuous behavior and model leadership entail. The seeming impossibility of simultaneously emulating two extremes illustrates the true difficulty in becoming what Kipling terms "a Man"□in other words, an exemplary human being.

## Colloquialism

The tone of "If" is characterized by its use of everyday phrases and slang, which lends it a colloquial (conversational, informal) tone. The opening lines use the common figure of speech "keep your head"; "'em" is purposefully used in line 16 rather than "them"; and

most especially, the poem culminates in an almost crudely common phrase, "You'll be a Man." The diction, however, seems appropriate as an address to a boy or a young man, to whom the poem is specifically addressed in the last line, and for whom the poem was originally published in a collection of children's stories. However, perhaps more importantly, this choice of diction seems to reflect the counsel of line 26 to not "lose the common touch."

# Historical Context

## Children's Literature of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

"If" was first published as part of a collection of stories for children, *Rewards and Fairies*. Literature written specifically for children is a relatively new phenomenon, having evolved as recently as the early nineteenth century. Kipling was well-known for his children's works, many of which featured fantasy worlds and talking animals designed to appeal especially to a child's imagination, as many other contemporary children's works did. However, the main aim of literature for children was not simply entertainment but also education in the morals and manners of society. *Rewards and Fairies* is interspersed with poems that distill lessons from its various stories. "If," in its didactic format, is one such poem, offering instruction on the virtues and characteristics of a model public figure.

## Women in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

As evidenced in its last line, "If" is specifically addressed to a boy who would become "a Man." The poem creates an interconnectedness between the attainment of true manhood and the abilities and virtues of a true leader□a mutual inclusiveness that by its nature excludes girls and women.

This exclusion of women from the attainment of roles of public leadership directly reflects the political landscape at the time of the poem's publication. In the late nineteenth century, American and British society regarded a woman's place as strictly private. While a husband's role was to provide for his family and, therefore, maintain a public life by nature of having a paying job, a wife's role□particularly that of a middle-class wife□was strictly within the home. A woman was responsible for all household affairs and for the moral upbringing of her children. This relegation of women to the home excluded them from any role in public life, including the rights to vote, to hold public office, to own property, or to attain a higher education. Women were treated as second-class citizens.

By the year 1910, the year "If" was published, women had slowly been awarded a number of rights□thanks to the work of middle-class feminists□including the rights in some cases to own property and to attain higher education. By 1910, however, women still had not been granted the right to vote. In Great Britain, a militant suffragist movement was built up, led by Emmeline Pankhurst, which resorted to violent means to campaign for women's voting rights, from hunger strikes to smashing department store windows.

World War I (1914—1918) brought a sudden change for the better as far as women's rights were concerned. During the war, the social dynamics of gender shifted when women became a powerful workforce, filling spots made vacant by men serving in the military. The onslaught of the war and the role that women played, which was instrumental in overturning the boundary between women and public life, figured greatly in the right to vote finally being awarded to women. In 1918, the United Kingdom granted full voting rights to women age thirty and older.

# Critical Overview

"If" is perhaps Kipling's most famous poem. Originally published as a part of the children's book *Rewards and Fairies*, it gained immediate popularity as an independent piece, becoming a sort of inspirational anthem whose popularity endures into the twenty-first century, almost to the point of becoming a cliché.

The poem itself is not the specific subject of significant literary criticism; however, Kipling himself has been the subject of scores of criticism since he began publishing in his early twenties. His receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1907, while met with wide approval from the general readership with which he was immensely popular, was met with dismay by the literary world: he was perceived by the literary establishment of his time as a writer of verse, rather than of poetry; the simple style of much of his prose was considered little more than entertaining; and many found the blunt, straightforward political messages of his work unrefined and vulgar.

Toward the end of his life, Kipling's once prolific output had ebbed, just as the optimism of the British Empire had changed to disillusion after the horrors of World War I. Kipling's work, once the most popular in Britain, became dated through its belief in the superiority and the romance of imperialism that was an integral part of Victorian-era philosophy.

It was the work of the poet T. S. Eliot that almost single-handedly brought Kipling's reputation back to serious literary consideration in the years following Kipling's death. Eliot found enough value in Kipling's verse to publish a newly edited collection in 1941; in his introductory essay he defends Kipling's abilities, despite his unpopular and dated political messages, as a poet. Eliot writes in the introduction to the collection, "Poetry is condemned as 'political' when we disagree with the politics; and the majority of readers do not want imperialism or socialism in verse. But the question is not what is ephemeral, but what is permanent . . . we therefore have to try to find the permanent in Kipling's verse."

Still, the question of Kipling's ability as a poet is one that writer Ann Parry, in *The Poetry of Rudyard Kipling*, calls "perpetually debated." Parry quotes T. R. Henn, who wrote in 1967, "'Kipling, nearly, but never wholly achieved greatness . . . the ultimate depth was lacking' because there was 'an absence of that high-breeding which is the essence of all style.'" Parry further notes in her book that one of the abiding tests of the quality of literature is its survival beyond contemporary popularity:

Kipling's poetry is seen as a failure to be something else, it is lacking in the range of qualities and characteristics for which high literature is valued. This definition of literature depends greatly on the ephemerality of popular texts: they must be lacking in aesthetic complexity because they disappear so quickly. It is at this point that Kipling becomes an enigma, because his popularity has never receded. . . . Continuing demand for a writer's work long after his death is one of the criteria that suggests literary greatness and value, and this perhaps explains why there are a group of critics who

have sought to admit Kipling to the first rank of literature, having duly chastised him for harmful attitudes, or having qualified his moral undesirability.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

# Critical Essay #1

*Tamara Fernando is a writer and editor based in Seattle, Washington. In this essay, Fernando shows how both Christianity and Buddhism play a role in shaping Kipling's didactic poem "If."*

Rudyard Kipling was the most beloved writer of his time, and his most famous work was the poem "If," a four-stanza poem that first appeared in his children's collection *Rewards and Fairies.* "If" gained instantaneous popularity as an independent piece, a popularity that persists to this day. The poem is a rather inspirational instruction in the achievement of idealized ethical and moral behavior.

Kipling himself was a confirmed agnostic throughout his life. However, upon careful examination, the poem "If" reveals a deep influence of religious ethics upon the worldview that Kipling puts forth in this poem. In particular, "If" illustrates the influence of both Protestant Christian and of Buddhist philosophies in a quest toward an ideal life.

Kipling himself was often a vocal critic of Christian institutions, particularly of the doctrines related to salvation and human sinfulness, and especially of Christian missionary work. As a child, Kipling did not grow up in a particularly religious household, and although his parents were not churchgoing Methodists, both his paternal and maternal grandfathers had been Methodist preachers. However, despite the relative lack of traditional Christianity in Kipling's life, Kipling's own work nevertheless bears a marked influence from the tenets and the literature of Christianity. Angus Wilson writes in his biography of Kipling, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*:

The gospel of work (one of [Methodist founder] John Wesley's ever-reiterated themes), a hatred of frivolity, earnestness about life's purpose . . . these [Kipling] inherited from his ancestors. And the language of the Bible in which to clothe [his work]; especially the Psalms, Proverbs, . . . didactic poetry, in fact. This is the superficial inheritance of Kipling from his Wesleyan grandfathers.

Two of the tenets of Protestant Christianity mentioned here□the Protestant work ethic and the influence of Biblical verse□are specifically evident in Kipling's poem "If." Indeed, the style of the poem "If" is reminiscent of the Proverbs of the Bible. Take, for example, the first few lines of Proverb 12:

Whoever loves disciplines love knowledge

But he who hates reproof is stupid.

A good man obtains favor from the Lord,

But a man of evil devices he condemns.

A man is not established by wickedness

But the root of the righteous will never be moved.

This example from Proverbs instructs the reader in righteousness and godliness by providing specific examples of upright behavior and, for each of these examples, the consequences of their parallel corrupt behavior. The structure of "If" is quite similar to this Proverb, not only in its instruction toward righteous behavior, but in its use of parallels throughout the entire poem. In just one example, lines 3 and 4 of "If" read: "If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, / But make allowance for their doubting too." Just as parallel behaviors are illustrated in the Proverb above, forming the basic structure of the verse, so too does Kipling use parallel structure to make his point in advising the need to be able to both ignore doubt and make allowance for doubt. This trend is continued throughout the poem: for example, Kipling parallels the virtues of righteousness and humility in the first stanza by advising, "being hated, don't give way to hating, / And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise."

Kipling, though he did not espouse the theological doctrines of Protestantism, was still affected by its ethical and moral precepts. One of the most pervasive of Protestant ethics in Western society is the exaltation of work and productivity as godly and as a path toward salvation, along with an equal disdain for idleness. This societal view of work was in fact instrumental in the rise of industrialization and capitalism in Western societies. As Wilson notes in the quote given above, Kipling was not immune to the effect of the Protestant work ethic. This philosophy too is an integral part of the message Kipling puts forth in "If," which offers instruction in the virtues, actions, and behaviors that, to Kipling, are the hallmark of model leadership and the makeup of an exemplary man. The Protestant work ethic is specifically reflected in the second stanza: "If you can dream□and not make dreams your master; / If you can think□and not make thoughts your aim." Here, Kipling recognizes the need for idealism and philosophy, but it is truly the ability to act on those thoughts and ideals that is the message of these lines. Warning against idleness is also the aim of lines 29 and 30, which read, "If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run."

An idealization of work and action is also illustrated in the third stanza, exhorting one even to go so far as to "force your heart and nerve and sinew / To serve your turn long after they are gone." The bodily imagery here evokes manual labor, but not just labor without purpose: the body of this life should serve to make a lasting effect "long after" it is gone. Labor and work, therefore, should have lasting purpose.

It is interesting to note, then, that while these lines of the third stanza advise toward labor, progress, and results, the stanza's first quatrain seems to promote a much different message:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose, and start again at your beginnings,

And never breathe a word about your loss:

The message of these lines is almost in direct opposition to the instruction of the ensuing stanza, whose message seems to be to labor toward a lasting purpose. Here, however, the fruit of labor□both success and failure□is treated as absolutely inconsequential and therefore should be regarded with extreme detachment.

In fact, the exhortation toward detachment is a constant theme throughout the poem, echoing a very basic Buddhist teaching. Ainslie Embree, in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, explains the basis of Buddhist philosophy:

The threefold characterization of the nature of the world and all that it contains□sorrowful, transient, and soulless□is frequently repeated in Buddhist literature, and without fully grasping its truth no being has any chance of salvation. For until he thoroughly understands the three characteristics of the world a man will inevitably crave for permanence in one form or another, and as this cannot, by the nature of things, be obtained he will suffer, and probably make others suffer also.

Buddhism teaches that sorrow is created by desire, and all desire is driven by a craving for permanence. To recognize the impermanence of everything worldly is to rid oneself of desire. In Buddhism, the complete annihilation of desire leads to salvation.

Just as "If" shows the influence of Christianity on Kipling's worldview and artistry, so too does it reflect the perhaps more weighty influence of Eastern philosophy, particularly Buddhism. Kipling, who was born in India and spent his early adulthood living and traveling the subcontinent as a journalist, retained a passion for India throughout his life. Many of his most important works take place there, including his best novel, *Kim*. Kipling was throughout his life intensely interested in Eastern religions and held their philosophies in higher esteem than he did Christianity's. No doubt this was an influence of his father, John Lockwood Kipling, who was not a practicing Christian. John was a specialist in what was then known as Orientalism□that is, the study of the culture and religions of the Asiatic parts of the British Empire. For over twenty years, John ran a museum in Lahore, India, dedicated to the anthropological study of the Indian subcontinent. According to Wilson in *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, John, for whom Rudyard had a lifelong admiration, had a great deal of influence over the writings of his son; his knowledge and championing of Eastern culture surely influenced Kipling.

The Buddhist teaching of the impermanence of the worldly and the rejection of desire is reflected in lines 11 and 12 of "If": "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two imposters just the same." Triumph and disaster denote the polar opposite pinnacle of success and depth of failure, but here Kipling puts them on a completely even level. By calling them "imposters," he exhorts the reader to recognize that both success and failure are not guaranteed; they are impermanent and, therefore, an illusion.

The action Kipling recommends□to treat both success and failure, acquisition and loss, as one and the same□is based on a recognition of the world as impermanent. The poem implicitly advises against attaching any desire to an individual's actions, as has been shown also in the lines of the third stanza.

Another doctrine of Buddhism closely related to the philosophy regarding impermanence and desire, is the teaching of the Middle Way. Embree quotes the Buddhist writing, the *Samyutta Mikaya*: "There are two ends not to be served by a wanderer . . . the pursuit of desires and the pleasure which springs from desire . . . and the pursuit of pain and hardship . . . the Middle Way of the Tathagata avoids both these ends. It is enlightened."

The Middle Way, the *Samyutta Mikaya* goes on to explain, is what is known as the Noble Eightfold Path, which is a set of eight main precepts guiding the actions of the follower toward a correct behavior that ultimately leads to enlightenment. While the Buddhist teaching of the Middle Way is meant to lead the follower eventually to spiritual enlightenment, Kipling applies a sort of generalization of the ideal of a middle path to his own precepts set forth in "If." Indeed, the quest for a middle path in behavior, thought, and virtue is a running theme throughout the poem. In the first stanza, Kipling advises the reader toward righteous behavior□to be patient (line 5), honest (line 6), and to avoid hatred (line 7)□and, at the same time, to avoid self-righteousness (line 10). Other paradoxes are constructed throughout the poem□between thought and action in the second stanza, and even between the detachment advocated by the first quatrain of stanza 3, and the second quatrain which exhorts the reader to "hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'" These pairings of contradictory extremes serve to illustrate both the need and the means toward finding a balanced approach to life.

According to C. E. Carrington's essay "If You Can Bring Fresh Eyes to Read These Verses," in the *Kipling Journal*, Winston Churchill once commented that the last line of "If" should have read, "You'll be a god, my man!" Churchill's point, made tongue-in-cheek, was surely the impossibility of the idealist precepts set forth in "If" for a normal human being to accomplish. Indeed, the ideals that shape the poem, drawn from two different spiritual traditions, are meant by these religions to transcend the human state and achieve a divine status, be it the eternal salvation of the soul, or Nirvana. But the aspirations of the poem are not toward divinity, but clearly toward manhood□with a capital M. The ending that Kipling chose makes manhood□humanity□the pinnacle to be reached.

In *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, Wilson writes of Kipling that his "lifelong agnosticism includes always towards a reverence for the transcendental"; and indeed, "If" does call for a transcendence. But this transcendence, the poem seems to imply, does not exclude the earthly, the worldly, or the human, even though the spiritual traditions from which Kipling draws his ethics and morals would maintain quite the opposite. Rather, the last lines offer a reward of worldliness□"Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it," and for sublimity reached not in the spirit, but in the flesh of humanity□"you'll be a Man, my son!"

**Source:** Tamara Fernando, Critical Essay on "If," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

# Critical Essay #2

*Perkins is a professor of American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins explores the poem's idealistic yet bitter tone.*

Kipling's "If" has become his most popular and anthologized poem. Since its publication in 1909, many readers have professed the poem's set of rules to be inspirational and motivational in their focus on personal integrity and moral behavior and consider it to offer excellent advice to younger generations. Lines from the poem appear over the player's entrance to the center court at Wimbledon, a reflection of its timeless appeal. As James Harrison notes in his study of Kipling's works, "as a compendium of moral maxims, it may well still be being discovered by new readers as a kind of secular decalogue." Yet, not all readers have praised the poem. Harrison writes that some will find that it reduces "a minefield of moral complexities to a series of simplistic equations." He considers the poem's chief value to be as a "period piece□as a nostalgic sampler, in fact, from an age when a combination of willpower and firm moral direction could be seen as the solution." The poem is, in fact, an apt reflection of the period in which it was written as well as of the personal attitudes of its author toward that period. As such, it becomes a fascinating juxtaposition of idealism and bitterness.

Kipling included "If" in his collection *Rewards and Fairies* (1909). He placed it next to his short story "Brother Square-Toes," which champions George Washington's courage and leadership strengths. Kipling's depiction of Washington echoes not only the American hero but also Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, who in 1895 led several hundred Englishmen in a battle with the Boers in southern Africa. The Jameson Raid, as it came to be known, was one of the major contributing factors to England's engagement in the Boer War from 1899 to 1902. Jameson became a popular hero in England as a result. Kipling saw similar qualities in Jameson and Washington, regarding them as ideal leaders. Kipling expresses his romantic ideas about virtuous men of action by listing qualities he most admires in the poem. The "Man" the speaker envisions as a model to his son illustrates the author's idealist view of Washington and Jameson and could be an apt description of the traditional hero of popular adventure novels.

The poem also contains a darker side that reflects Kipling's attitude toward the failure of British imperialism. George Orwell, in his essay on Kipling, insists that the author "belongs very definitely to the period 1885—1902." Orwell writes that Kipling was "the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase." Toward the end of this period, public attitudes toward the British Empire began to change. Even though England had been victorious in World War I, her power began to wane. Orwell writes that the English became "anti-militarist, bored by the Empire. . . . [T]he desire to paint the map red had evaporated." Kipling recognized that "the virtue had gone out of the classes he idealized [and] the young were hedonistic or disaffected." World War I "and its aftermath embittered him." Orwell concludes that Kipling "spent the later part of his life in sulking, and no doubt it was political disappointment rather than literary vanity that account for this." This bitterness emerges in "If" as the bleak assessment of the world and its

inhabitants, which provide grueling obstacles that one must conquer to become a virtuous, ideal man.

Kipling writes the lines of the poem as one long sentence running for four stanzas, which lists all of the qualities the speaker insists are necessary if one strives to become "a Man." The sheer number of obstacles that the speaker suggests his son will have to face attests to the poem's harsh vision of human nature and destiny. The son must meet the challenges proffered by this hostile world with courage and stoicism if he is to live with dignity.

Kipling's bitter vision of the world begins in the first stanza with a catalogue of betrayals and attacks. The speaker calls on his son to find patience and the courage to ignore those who will blame him for misfortunes, doubt him, lie about his abilities, and hate him. In the final line, he calls on his son to strive to achieve, "yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise," suggesting that he will be attacked for these qualities as well.

Kipling's focus is on stoicism in the second stanza as he warns of the dangers of losing control of one's self to dreams or thoughts or being affected too much by "Triumph and Disaster," which he cynically claims are both "impostors." In this world, "the things you give your life to" are "broken." In the fifth and sixth lines, Kipling returns to his assessment of human nature, which can prompt the twisting of truths and the trapping of fools.

In the third stanza, Kipling concentrates on the idealistic hero's battles with destiny rather than with others. The qualities that are required here are romantic daring, which will cause him to risk his fortune "on one turn of pitch-and-toss" and resilience if he loses and must start again. He will need the traditional British resilience if he does lose and strength of will when he begins to physically decline.

Kipling returns to his dark vision of human nature in the last stanza with its non-virtuous crowds and hurtful friends. The speaker stresses a note of humility here when he warns of the dangers of success and presents a more troubling suggestion to his son about maintaining an emotional detachment from the world, letting "all men count with you, but none too much." This warning appears appropriate in the poem's bleak world of lies and betrayals. The speaker's final maxim is to fill each moment with worthwhile activity.

By the time the poem's final lines describe the successful outcome of overcoming all of the twenty-six obstacles listed above, becoming a man appears to be an insurmountable task. The repetition of the word "if" suggests an uncertainty of accomplishment. Kipling's ideal hero could combine a stoic perseverance with self-reliant individualism to accomplish these goals. But, the effort seems as if it would require herculean skills and self-control.

Perhaps the uncertainty of overcoming such obstacles reflects Kipling's attitude toward the decline of British imperialism. David Perkins, in his *History of Modern Poetry*, writes that Kipling "maintained an ideal of the British Empire (conservative, protective, uplifting, and firmly legal); he became one of its most popular spokesman." When public opinion

began to turn against this enterprise, Kipling's reputation suffered. Perkins suggests, "he was too vividly associated in the public mind with British imperialism."

The dark vision of human nature that permeates "If" could be a reflection of Kipling's attitude toward those who failed to support England's imperialism and his own alliance with this enterprise. When the speaker suggests that he has experience with others blaming, doubting, and lying about him, he could be revealing Kipling's response to his detractors. Kipling's attitude toward the waning support for imperialism is reflected in the speaker's advise to his son not to "make dreams your master" and to protect himself from failure since he has seen the things he "gave [his] life to, broken."

Kipling saw his dreams of empire wane and suffered the criticism of many of his readers, yet he refused to give up his artistic endeavors. When the speaker of "If" calls his son to face the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that lay before him, this could be an extension of Kipling's own advice to himself so that he, too, could gain "the Earth and everything that's in it."

**Source:** Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "If," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

# Topics for Further Study

Ann Parry writes in *The Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* that the question of whether Kipling was truly a poet has been "perpetually debated." She quotes writer T. R. Henn's answer to this question: "When his technical mastery, variety and craftsmanship have all been recognized, it has to be said that 'Kipling, nearly, but never wholly achieved greatness . . . the ultimate depth was lacking.'" Look at several of Kipling's poems of your choosing, and discuss the following in an essay: do you agree that Kipling's work shows "technical mastery?" Why or why not? Do you agree or disagree with the assessment that Kipling's work lacks "ultimate depth?" Why or why not? Use examples to support your opinions.

Kipling wrote "If" in 1910. Research other poets who were writing and publishing in England or the United States at the same time as Kipling. Compare and contrast Kipling's style with the style of another poet of your choosing from the same time period.

"If" was originally published in Kipling's collection of children's stories, *Rewards and Fairies*, as a companion piece to the story "Brother Square-Toes," which features George Washington as a character. Read "Brother Square Toes." Write a brief essay showing how "If" serves to complement the short story.

"If" is written in a strict meter. Each stanza consists of eight lines rhyming abab cdcd. The "a" and "c" lines, each with eleven syllables, and the "b" and "d" lines, each with ten syllables, are written in iambic pentameter. Following the structure of "If," write your own didactic poem on a subject of your choosing.

# Compare and Contrast

**1910:** Women are granted few rights and are treated like second-class citizens in both the United States and Europe. In particular, women are not allowed to work outside the home, may not own property, are denied a higher education, and are not allowed to hold public office nor to vote. The feminist movement, which is supported primarily by middle- and upper-class women, works toward more equality for women. Feminists such as Emmeline Pankhurst even resort to violent means to gain attention for the feminist cause, engaging in property damage and notorious hunger strikes.

**Today:** Women in the Western world have much greater freedoms than they did at the turn of the twentieth century. They can live a life independent of men, with the ability to own property and maintain a career. Women also figure greatly in public life and politics. Although the United States has yet to vote in a female president, Great Britain has had a female prime minister, the United States has had several female governors, and some states are represented in the Senate by all-female delegations.

**1910:** The British Empire is the largest and most powerful empire in world history. The saying "The sun never sets on the British Empire" reflects the global reach of the English. Its massive empire makes Britain the most powerful country of the pre—World War I era.

**Today:** The twentieth century sees the demise of the British Empire, brought about by two catastrophic world wars and the empire's eventual inability to keep a firm grasp on its colonies. India, its most lucrative colony, wins independence in 1947. Britain today remains an important player in world politics but has ceded its place of dominance to the United States.

**1910:** In the decades prior to World War II, most poetry, such as the work of Rudyard Kipling, is written according to strict meter and/or rhyme. This observance is prevalent among the works of Kipling's contemporaries as well as his recent predecessors.

**Today:** The post—World War II literary world has seen drastic evolution in poetic form as an artistic retaliation to the horrors of modern warfare and as an echo of other artistic movements, such as the development of jazz as a musical style. Poets abandon strict meter and experiment with free verse, as reflected in the Beat movement. Computers and technology enable poets to experiment further with language through hypertext.

# What Do I Read Next?

*Rewards and Fairies* (1910) is a collection of children's stories by Kipling, a sequel to *Puck of Pook's Hill*. "If" was first published in this collection as a companion piece to the story "Brother Square Toes."

*Something of Myself* (1937) is Kipling's autobiography, in which he discusses his life, his work, and his political beliefs. It provides a humorous insight into the mind of a man at once popular and notorious for his blunt style and political views.

*The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) are Kipling's most famous and endearing works. The books contain a collection of stories for children, set in the jungles of India and featuring animals as their main characters. The most popular stories feature the character of Mowgli, a boy raised by wolves in the jungle.

*Captains Courageous* (1897) is a coming-of-age novel by Kipling that relates the adventures of a rich, spoiled boy who is rescued from a shipwreck by a fishing boat. This novel is typically classified as juvenilia.

*Kim* (1901) is often argued to be Kipling's most mature novel. The main character, Kim, also known as Kimball O'Hara, is the orphaned son of an Irish soldier who lives on the streets of India. In search of his destiny, Kim embarks on travels that bring him in contact with such figures as the Tibetan Dalai Lama. Although the novel contains several racial stereotypes, it has been praised in modern times for its ability to rise above the racism that characterized other contemporary works, and it is widely viewed as Kipling's best work.

*A Brief History of India* (2003), by Alain Daniélou, provides an insightful and easy to follow portrait of a country that figured prominently in Kipling's life and writing.

*A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885, reprint, 1999, with illustrations by Tasha Tudor), by celebrated writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850—1894), is filled with poems for young readers. Stevenson lived at the same time as Kipling and wrote children's literature as well as adult literature, like Kipling.

# Further Study

Forster, E. M., *A Passage to India*, reprint, Harvest Books, 1965.

Originally published in 1924, this novel follows the lives of three English newcomers to India. It was written at a time when India was still under British control and explores the clash of Eastern and Western cultures there. Forster (1879—1970), like Kipling, was fascinated with India.

Gilmour, David, *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2003.

Kipling's legacy has endured a long history of vilification, but this biography offers a fresh, early-twenty-first-century perspective on his life and ideologies.

Mallett, Phillip, *Rudyard Kipling: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Mallett concentrates on Kipling's writing life and family life.

Yeats, William Butler, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 1, *The Poems*, rev. 2d ed., Scribner, 1996.

Yeats, who received the Nobel Prize in 1923, was a contemporary of Kipling, though a markedly different poet. Although Kipling was more popular than Yeats during their lifetimes, Yeats's work is today regarded as far superior.

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