

The Eternal Abiding Mantra: 'If' by Kipling

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Abstract

This paper attempts to require up a study of one of the foremost effervescent pieces of poetry written in English literature: Rudyard Kipling's 'If'. After discussing Kipling's literary style and inclinations, we delve into his poem 'If' understanding his Weltanschauung, his motivations and his endeavours to supply through this singular piece of poetry a Magna Carta of virtue to all or any humankind of virtuous conduct and qualities which will help them lead their life fruitfully and properly. The paper analyses how Kipling weaves through his poetic narration and diction a roadmap with steps and halts, guiding travellers within the course of their life journey.

Keywords: Virtue, life journey, attributes, qualities, ideologies, guidelines

Rudyard Kipling earns a definite niche for himself in English literary history straddling the late Victorian century, pushing geographical and ideological boundaries, showcased through his riveting, engaging, vibrant yet paradoxical literary productions.

Kipling's works remain arguably one among the very first and richest (post)colonial writings. His birth, his upbringing, his extensive travels and placements at various geographical locations, prominently his taste of colonial life, give us an insight into Kipling: The Literary Man.

Where numerous of his writings set in India exhibit a zest and enthusiasm for Eastern culture, landscape, and peoples, an equally sizable amount of his poems are crammed with racism, pro-imperial jingoism, and an undying belief within the white man's right to global rule. It's this paradox in his writing sensibilities that earned him criticism over time too. On one hand he wrote, "The White Man's Burden" with its outright and unsightly racism: 'Half devil and half child', 'new caught sullen peoples'. Then he also goes on to write down "Kim" during which the opulence of India's exotic landscape is captured overlaid by the uneasy presence of British Raj.

While pursuing Kipling's literature we cannot help but ponder over the duality in his identity consequently reflected in his work. Critic Douglas Kerr wrote that Kipling remains an author who has the ability to inspire passionate disagreement and his place in literary and cultural history is way from settled. An increasing recognition of his extraordinary narrative gifts, make him a force to be reckoned with

In this paper we plan to illustrate these very narrative gifts of Kipling by taking over for study, a poem (we can afford to isolate from the planet of his geographical and colonial writings) which testifies to his skill and talent in quintessentially authoring world writing in English: ‘If.’

Published in 1910, in his collection of story and short fiction: ‘Rewards and Fairies’, within the chapter. ‘Brother Square Toes’, ‘If’ has become one among the best literary treasures bestowed upon the planet by Kipling amongst his other literary legacies.

In ‘If’, Kipling turns didactic, he addresses the readers, one and enormous, taking the mantle of the guide and philosopher providing us with the ever-abiding mantra of conducting ourselves through this reality of existence: life.

According to Kipling as expressed in his autobiography, *Something of Myself* (1937), the origins of ‘If—’ dwell the failed Jameson raid of 1895-6, when British colonial statesman Leander Starr Jameson led a raid against the South African (Boer) Republic . Kipling recorded “Among the verses in ‘Rewards’ was one set called ‘If’ ... They were drawn from Jameson’s character, and contained counsels of perfection most easy to give...”

However, the poem’s final words: ‘..you’ll be a person, my son’ have also been inferred as Kipling’s address to his actual son , the poem serving as a fatherly lesson: listing the required characteristics he should cultivate to be a paragon of manly virtue.

Perhaps what is the highlight of Kipling’s sermon is that the structure of the poem, interspersed with the clauses with ‘If’, giving the poem a chant like quality. this is often a classic example of ‘anaphora’ utilized in English poetry. Kipling advocates a stoical attitude to living, within the face of all that the journey of life may bring.

He preaches resilience , he preaches latitude: if one can maintain their composure when others around them aren’t ready to , if one can believe themselves when others don’t, while making a scope for his or her doubting too , if one can have patience to never tire of waiting , if one doesn’t subside to lying or hating despite being lied to or being hated.

The effervescence of Kipling’s moral instruction lies beautifully in how he begins imploring by ‘If’ then presenting a counter to the proposition:

“If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim”

He has necessitated the worth of dreaming, but not being held in servitude by those dreams, the worth of thinking but not being overwhelmed by thoughts. He urges treating victories and failures in life alike. He implores patience if one’s words are twisted and morphed by others for his or her vested interests and perseverance if one has got to redo one’s hard labour again so as to rebuild something that has been broken.

It becomes more and more implicit as we undertake a study of 'If' that in it Kipling provides a handbook of guidelines and tenets that one can stay rooted with , that one can focus attention on allowing themselves to be directed through the course of this enigmatic journey of life. What resonates perhaps most loudly and beautifully through Kipling's writing and narrative style is that his words stand as true as when it had been published 100 years ago as they are doing today. Kipling's tenets are a dictate for the human condition; guiding principles of virtue and moral mettle which may help traverse life.

“If you'll make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss” “....
never breathe a word about your loss....
If you'll force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
....And so hold on when there's nothing in you”

We can analyse as we study 'If' , how Kipling counsels courage, fortitude and can exhorting that one should be able to take risks and will those risks end up fatal , be willing to possess another go at it again, even having lost having the desire to only hold on.

Kipling writes detailing how imperative the virtues of humility and detachment, unwavering and steady within the face of ups and downs in life are often : if one can amass knowledge of the planet yet been grounded , if one can reach the very best pedestals in life yet be humble, if neither enemies nor well wishers can deduct something from one to their detriment, if one can make whatever time they need left count with fixing their hardest and best effort.

“Yours is that the Earth and everything that's in it...”

This single line brings to a climax, Kipling's exhortations via the medium of his masterpiece, 'If', as he surmises all the ideals one can bear in mind together walks this earth and undertakes this journey of life and emerge ethically and morally triumphant at the top.

The last line of the poem famously reads: 'And—which is more—you'll be a person, my son!', which we've inferred as coming from a more personal place for Kipling addressing his own son within the hope of imparting valuable fatherly wisdom and philosophy enabling him to be a epitome of virtuous attributes , but we clearly gather and see by the renown and longevity of Kipling's work , he ultimately continues to impart to larger humanity.

T.S Eliot wrote for Kipling that he has an immense gift for using words and has curiosity and skill of observation and together with his mind and with all his senses In his pursuit of writing in 'If' we see Kipling portrays clever and memorable poetic skill to drive home his message.

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