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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

An Analysis of Rudyard Kipling's *IF*

Rukhsana Saifee

Assistant Professor of English,
Chartered Institute of Technology,
Aburoad (Raj)

'IF' by Rudyard Kipling is a didactic work meant to give instruction. This poem is a popular classic of English literature for its familiarity and inspiration. The poem is full of humility and warmth and is a timeless appeal of the passing down of wisdom from father to son. The poem suggests a set of rules, a number of virtues and maxims that are required to transform a Youngman into an adult or an ideal man who achieves success in life by practicing various qualities of character given by the poet.

Regarded as a major 'innovator in the art of short story', Rudyard Kipling was born in India in December, 1865. He was a poet, short story writer and novelist. He was awarded Noble Prize for literature in 1907. Rudyard Kipling's poem 'IF' first appeared in his collection 'Rewards and Fairies' in 1909. It has been judged as Britain's favourite poem in BBC Television programme 'The Book Worm'. This poem has been translated into 27 languages of the world. 'If' is an inspirational poem for the young and the old alike, for sportsmen, for politicians and for school and college going young men. The poem is printed on cards and has been hung in offices and bed rooms. We can read the four lines of this poem while entering the entrance of Wimbledon's centre court. This poem contains mottos and maxims for life and is thus Kipling's prescription for success. The timeless appeal of the passing down of knowledge and wisdom from father to son is recognized and appreciated by an audience all too familiar with various phases of parenthood. The persona in the poem recommends self confidence, calmness of mind, love and humbleness, as sterling qualities for success in life. He further recommends seeing dreams and realizing dreams through hard work, treating victory and failure as two sides of the same coin, not losing hope in the face of shattered dreams and producing strong will to continue work steadfastly and finally making use of every second.

'If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you'

This is the beginning line of the poem. The first lesson the poet communicates this first stanza is to be positive when faced with differences of opinions and disapproved. We are advised to keep our cool even when other people around us are losing their composure and finding faults with us. People may doubt our integrity but we should be patient and tolerant and wait for truth to come out. The overwhelming reference of 'you' or 'your' is used many times which has the affect of breaking out of the poem and speaking to the reader directly. Patience as a virtue and the correct way to speak and feel is of interest in the next four lines. There can be a situation when people spread lies about us. In such situations we should not react to these lies with our set of lies. Instead, we should face these trying moments with fortitude and inner strength. When people lose faith in us and start hating us, we don't have to hate them. We should not leave our path of righteousness. In the last line, Kipling advises humility. We should be humble and practice righteousness without being self righteous. So in the first stanza the poet teaches his son the moral qualities of equanimity, self confidence, honesty and humility.

The second stanza begins with the line,

‘If you dream and not make dreams your aim,
If you can think and not make thought your aim’

We all dream about objectives that we want to achieve in life. So the second stanza deals with the goals and aims that we have in our life. Dreaming is a desirable thing, but we should not allow these dreams to master us. One must think deeply, but try not to limit his endeavor to thinking alone, because being practical is also equally imperative. Thoughts shape our life, they provide us a vision to follow. But these thoughts should not master us to the extent that we stop listening to other people’s thoughts or consider our thoughts supreme and other people’s thoughts inferior. In our life sometimes we succeed in our efforts, sometimes we fail. They are the two sides of the same coin-‘Life’. Victory and misfortune should be treated alike. We should treat triumphs and disasters with the same attitude and approach. We should not feel disheartened when there is failure in life. Successes and failures are temporary and hence we should not attach much value to them. If we have the courage to proclaim our truth publicly, then we should also have the courage to hear if misrepresentation of that truth is done by some wicked person. On such occasion we should have the fortitude to accept the words of these self seekers. In fact, this is their trick to incite the listeners to act unwisely. Further if we witness the devastation of things we once built, and rebuild the same with a rekindled fire, nothing can stop us. We should try once again from the beginning to build the solid edifice of our dreams with our old and delicate faculties or abilities. It shows the iron willpower and unrelenting determination of an individual. Thus in this stanza the poet advises his son to practice perseverance, continuous action and strong work ethics to rebuild the ruined dreams and tasks.

‘If you can make one heap of all your winnings,
And risk it on one turn of pitch and toss’

In this stanza the importance of risk taking in life is given by the poet. One cannot become great without taking a calculated risk. This stanza speaks of taking everything we’ve worked for and risk it all, and then lose it and have to start again. Life is a game of victory and losing. The loss should not discourage one not to try once again. The poet advises the young man to put all his achievements together and then take a risk to do something new which can be compared to a game where one throws coins to hit a mark. But he misses the mark and loses all the money. This should not discourage him. The key to it is not telling anyone about this loss. He should be very cautious, in not letting other people know about his loss. This shows integrity. Then he should gather all his inner strength of mind and body and start again from the beginning. He should continue making another effort. It is his sheer strength of will power that pushes him on and says, “Continue your efforts in spite of difficulties. You will win.”

“If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue
Or walk with Kings nor lose the common touch”

The importance of the final stanza lies in not becoming corrupted by the machinations of status or position. It speaks of you being able to work with anyone and not change who you are or what you stand for. The poet advises the young man to mix with the crowds without losing his individuality. He can walk with kings or people in high position without losing touch with the commonality. “Kings ” is contrasted with “common” in order to cover all the strata of society in the same way as “foes” and “friends” is within the next line. He should treat everybody with equality. He should not feel hurt either by the behavior of his enemies or his loving friends. He should treat a foe with the same humility as a friend and not allow them to hurt you. He should treat all men equally without giving more importance to some. These four lines make a case for

equality and equal treatment with all irrespective of their position or relationship with the young man.

Referring to the non-stoppable time, the poet gives the most important advice that time passes without waiting for anyone. The young man should not waste time in idle pursuits. The minutes are unforgiving i.e., the time is impatient and relentless. A moment spent in lethargy makes us regretful in the days to come. The young man should fill every minute with sixty seconds of efforts and industry. Constant and diligent labour is the sterling virtue of a genuine man. Therefore the poet's advice is that his son make use of every second of his time by putting in all efforts and not waste it in useless distractions. The last line serves as the answer to every 'IF' presented in the poem. This final line can be seen as an affectionate address from an older mentor to a young boy. The last line is also the realization of the passing down of knowledge and wisdom from father to son, and it is last time we readers realize that the poem is not directly addressed to them but to a younger figure. If the young man follows all the instructions- the maxims given by the poet, he will one day become the owner of every valuable thing in this world. He will be the master of this world and he will enter manhood and adulthood. He will be a real man, a perfect ideal man with all desirable values of self confidence, realization of his objectives, perseverance and a sense of equality to all fellow human beings. Such a perfect man will lack nothing in the world and will be the monarch of all he surveys. He will then be able to earn the proud privilege of being called "MAN."

Overall there is much truth and wisdom given by the poet Rudyard Kipling through his motivational words. He has expanded a world of virtue and knowledge for the readers.

Works Cited:

Rudyard Kipling's children stories 'Rewards and Stories'