



Rudyard Kipling's Techniques

Citation

Friedman, Robert Louis. 2016. Rudyard Kipling's Techniques. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

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Rudyard Kipling's Techniques: Their Influence on a Novel of Stories

An Introductory Essay

and an Original Novel, *Answers Lead Us Nowhere*

Robert Louis Friedman

A Thesis in the Field of Literature and Creative Writing

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

November 2016

Abstract

This thesis investigates the techniques of Rudyard Kipling and his influence on my “novel of short stories”. How did Kipling advance the short story form over a half-century of experimentation? How did his approaches enliven the reader’s experience to such a degree that his greatest works have remained in print? Beginning in 1888 with *Plain Tales From the Hills*, Kipling utilized three innovative techniques: the accretion of unrelated stories into the substance of a novel; the use of tales with their fantastical dreamlike appeal (as opposed to standard fictional styles of realism or naturalism) to both salute and satirize characters in adult fiction; and the swift deployment of back story to enhance both the interwoven nature and tale-like feel of the collection. Several of Kipling’s later India tales are examined for their advancing sophistications; and memorable short stories from his later years are analyzed for further experimentations with form. In addition, Kipling’s turbulent disposition is investigated for possible clues to his varied approaches to fiction. Subsequent to these queries, my novel of short stories utilizes the three techniques – interweaving unrelated stories to congeal to a whole; allowing characters to see themselves as the center of a tale; and utilizing swift back story as a tacit comparison to the stark realities of the present – leaving room for my own experimentations.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with love to Christine, Tommy, and Teddy for allowing me to travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts once a week so they could gab about me behind my back.

Did you miss me? (Did you notice I wasn't there?)

Acknowledgments

When it comes to education, I have been lucky – my best teachers always performed way above their pay grade. I've been taught by billionaire minds, no matter what their pension advisors told them.

My deepest thanks to the following, listed in descending order of age:

- . Richard Macksey, without whom I'd still owe incompletes at Johns Hopkins
- . Leo Damrosch, for his ample patience, thoroughness, swiftness (no pun intended), and much appreciated generosity
- . Talaya Delaney, for suddenly falling blind and not spotting dozens of pagination errors

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
I. Rudyard Kipling's Techniques: Their Influence on a Novel of Stories.....	1
Stories that Accrete into a Novel.....	2
The Grounded Tale: where Fantasy and Realism merge.....	11
Back Story: Concision and Conclusion.....	24
A Volatile Man Transformed.....	34
My Original Fiction.....	44
Bibliography	47

Chapter 1

Rudyard Kipling's Techniques: Their Influence on a Novel of Stories

This essay on literary influence will focus on one author, Rudyard Kipling, and, while addressing his half-century of growth and experimentation within the short story form, will dive most deeply into his first story collection, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888; hereafter, *Plain Tales*). Kipling's eclectic approach to shorter fiction has influenced several aspects of my creative work-in-progress and inspired the shaping and experimentation within my stories. Specifically in the vignette form, Kipling: 1) meshes short narratives that accrete into a novel; 2) blends the styling of a "tale" with realism; and 3) interweaves complex backstory with remarkable concision. Kipling's publishing career lasted nearly fifty years, and he boldly delved within the short fiction arena, experimenting with narrative forms as diverse as science fiction, sea yarns, war stories, humor, supernatural tales, parables, and children's fiction, while utilizing an extraordinary range of narrative techniques (this paper will only allude to his novels and not touch upon his voluminous poetry). Specific stories will be analyzed for their direct impact on my creative work.

As for literary criticism, this essay will highlight the extreme reactions this particular author has elicited from the 1880s until the present. This critical bifurcation is not incidental to Kipling's creative output or his influence on my fiction. Is there another author of such genius who has been recipient of both the highest plaudits and most hostile derision? The ambivalence extends within individual critics. Henry James commented,

“Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius (as distinct from fine intelligence) that I have ever known” (Page ix). Yet James’ views swung wildly over three decades, at times on a story-by-story basis. Kipling remains the youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, age forty-two, yet was considered passé by preeminent literati by the time the honor was bestowed. In the words of George Orwell, “During five literary generations every enlightened person has despised him, and at the end of that time nine-tenths of those enlightened persons are forgotten and Kipling is in some sense still here” (Orwell 397). This comment alone, true eighty years after Kipling’s death, raises questions for any author: why is Kipling still here? Why has *Plain Tales* remained in print for one hundred and twenty-seven years? Why is Hollywood currently producing not one but two competing versions of *The Jungle Books*? How was this voluble person able to pick up a pen and cede his turbulent disposition to an empathic artist within? In short, what are the qualities in Rudyard Kipling’s fiction that have transcended time?

Stories that Accrete into a Novel

Kipling began the stories that grew into *Plain Tales* at the age of eighteen, publishing the collection in 1888 when twenty-two. Over the ensuing two years, the book was printed across the British Empire, and, combined with a torrent of exceptional literary output, its author became an international celebrity. Many years later one of his most vehement detractors reflected on the work; Leonard Woolf deplored nearly every aspect of Rudyard Kipling as did his wife Virginia and their Bloomsbury circle: the “vulgarity” of Kipling’s language, the perceived lack of engagement with modernism,

his absence from literary critical debates, and his presumed far-right politics. Yet according to biographer Victoria Glendinning, when an elderly Leonard Woolf reflected on his youthful experience in Ceylon with the British civil service, “Leonard could not decide whether Rudyard Kipling, in his short stories about amorous intrigues and petty snobberies in Simla, the Indian hill-station, had molded his characters accurately in the image of Anglo-Indian society or ‘whether we were moulding our characters accurately in the image of a Kipling story’” (Glendinning 78). This witty observation encompasses the accretive power of Kipling’s initial masterwork and subsequent Indian tales.

Employed as a journalist in Northern India, Kipling observed the minute workings of the British Raj, and composed diverse vignettes on those he observed: from government bureaucrats to local businessmen, senior officers and their underlings to the fighting man, established society women to their competition, accommodating but poor Indians, and lonely British men and Indian women seeking intimacy or sexual release.

The vignettes within *Plain Tales* occur in one city at a specific moment in time. Although there is no unifying plot, the cumulative effect is an immersion in a singular place. The vignettes accrete into a novel. One may read the stories in any order, yet each reflects on the world of Simla, Northern India, circa 1888. The Raj – the British Empire’s dominion over India – is center stage, a world simultaneously gritty and surreal. Displacement is the ruling emotion for the British, whether it is Mrs. Hawksbee manipulating romances among those who forget their “caste” within the social scene, drunken officers competing in a club or abusing their wives, or junior officers colluding to make a suicide appear otherwise. Their choices are determined by a code of behavior transposed from the British Isles but made malleable by local conditions. For the Indian

citizens – teenage girls pining for British soldiers who view them as trifles, con artists manipulating superstitious neighbors, chubby little Muhammad Din finding joy in a polo ball but dying from inescapable sickness – their displacement is in conducting daily rituals among those who disapprove and condescend, leading to supplications, confusion, and anger.

Characters recur but do not command center stage. Mrs. Hawksbee, forty-three, charming and coy, appears in five stories and several more in later collections. Her ongoing battle for control of the social scene against Mrs. Reiver occurs twice, in “The Rescue of Pluffles” and “In Error, creating a backdrop that permeates the entire work. Once their subtle battle lines are drawn, we do not need to witness either woman in ensuing stories to sense their ongoing maneuvers. When Mrs. Hawksbee reappears in “Consequences”, the absence of Mrs. Reiver does not erase our knowledge of their battle. In “The Rescue of Pluffles”, our wry narrator informs us that Mrs. Reiver “was not honestly mischievous like Mrs. Hawksbee. She was wicked in a business-like way. There was never any scandal—she had not generous impulses enough for that.” (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 47-8). Thereby her absence in future Mrs. Hawksbee tales does not erase her malice sprinkled around Simla.

Strickland, a British police detective appears twice in *Plain Tales* and in three stories in later collections. He is the voice of common sense and plain speaking. As a police detective his job is to ferret through tales spun by common criminals, often by coating his skin in disguise as an Indian; but as a British citizen with a personal life, he must ferret through local gossip and the imposed social rules that deign whom he should and should not marry.

Mulveney, Ortheris, and Learoyd, “The Soldiers Three” whose adventures recur in Kipling’s Indian stories, appear four times in *Plain Tales*, colloquially transcribed by their friend, our unnamed narrator. These are the brave and reckless men who fight the intense haphazard battles that officers in Simla tend to miss. We can admire the three for their exuberant courage and loyalty, all the while recognizing their petty sadisms, ignorance, and drunken venting.

In the forty-two stories in *Plain Tales*, Mrs. Hawksbee, Strickland, and the “Soldiers Three” do not overlap, yet their recurrences create an awareness of a unique community. T.S. Eliot wrote that these collective characters capture “the one perfect picture of a society of English, narrow, snobbish, spiteful, ignorant, and vulgar, set down absurdly in a continent of which they are unconscious” (Page, 37). And a pre-*Dubliners* James Joyce commented, “If I knew Ireland as well as R.K. seems to know India, I fancy I could write something good” (Page 36).

A cousin to *Plain Tales* might be Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg Ohio*, but Anderson captures a quieter world that ultimately revolves around the life experience of George Willard, and does so with less stylistic range. It is a Bildungsroman, with George as the artist-in-the-making. With *Plain Tales*, our narrator, an unnamed but occasionally obtrusive journalist, observes and reports the goings-on of Simla. While he is the book’s unifying presence, and often startles us with his cynical wit, at times he reports in first person narrative and other times vanishes into third-person omniscience; on occasion there is a mix of the two when he pops in and out of a narrative. In some stories, the journalist-narrator refrains from expressing his views, but in others he cannot constrain himself from wry observances and mock-philosophizing: “This is not a tale exactly. This

is a Tract; and I am immensely proud of it. Making a tract is a feat” (Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 89). In “Thrown Away” we sense the journalist's empathy for a flailing young man sinking under adult responsibilities. Yet after the man's suicide, the narrator seems ambivalent towards an army major's decision to disguise the cause of death as cholera; the officer wishes to spare both the young man's family and his memory within the community. As a result of such narrative capriciousness, the reader remains aware of the tenuous emotions of daily life in the Raj – even our narrator, a journalist no less, cannot restrain his moodiness from bleeding into his reportage.

Emotionally, *Plain Tales* swings as wide as the real world, at times within one story. Half of the tales might be classified as serious, although witticisms mocking British superiority sneak in. Half might be deemed social satires. Despite his subsequent reputation as a British imperialist, Kipling's youthful sympathies are clearly with the locals. A constant theme that further unites *Plain Tales* is how the Raj scorns local customs as barbaric, yet the British unconsciously follow similar customs. Arranged Hindu or Muslim marriages are mocked as unconscionable, but any British man or woman falling in love outside their social stratum is redirected. In “Kidnapped”, a young bureaucrat wishing to marry a woman deemed unsuitable, is abducted by his friends and taken on a hunting trip, not to be returned until after the wedding date. The British arrange their marriages too, we comprehend, but with tacit rules that pretend otherwise.

Gossip allows the reader to feel complicit in Simla's goings-on. When we overhear spicy information, our sensations merge with those of the residents, furthering the sense that we are engaged with a novel rather than disconnected vignettes. Simla has a stern unspoken culture. Its inhabitants are cognizant of that hidden agenda and the peril

in disturbing its order. Gossip unifies life for the British, and takes on a multitude of purposes. It can bolster power among the informed. If characters attempt to stretch beyond the confines of the British system, gossip serves as reconnaissance data, providing information on those who stray. As our narrator comments in the middle of “Watches of the Night”, “...it is a venerable fact that, if a man or woman makes a practice of, and takes a delight in, believing and spreading evil of people indifferent to him or her, he or she will end in believing evil of folk very near and dear” (Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 72). These vignettes are seemingly too brief to delve into the human psyche, yet the characters consistently react to their social position.

Stylistically capricious, the stories swing between humor, acrid satire, and despair. In “The Taking of Lungtungpen”, inexperienced troops bathing naked in a river, are emboldened to attack an enemy Burmese army. They win, and we wonder whether they are heroes or fools, knowing perfectly well that they are both. In a story published in a later collection in 1888, “The Drums of the Fore and Aft”, two drummer boys, aged fourteen but wild as soldiers, guzzle a bottle of rum, and thus emboldened, spur retreating soldiers to regroup and counterattack an Afghan horde. While they rat-a-tat-tat “The British Grenadiers”, the soldiers are victorious, but both boys are killed. Our reactions swing from shocked laughter, to disgust, sadness, and a melancholy recognition of the capriciousness of heroism. Henry James wept at this story, commenting that Kipling’s depiction was “astonishingly contagious, in spite of the unromantic complexion of it” (Page 85).

Characters may evolve in minute ways, yet each vignette is an isolated moment with little time for epiphany. Emblematic of the spirit of Simla, Mrs. Hawksbee is

steadfastly charming and observant, and her resistance to change enforces her power.

The combined effect mirrors the Raj: over time, human relations may alter, but the Raj must appear inviolable to maintain its authority. *Plain Tales* is clearly the work of a gleeful young man reveling in the nose tweak he's giving fellow Brits. The social whirl behind the Raj is his central character, and he dissects it with a mix of malicious humor towards unimaginative authority and admiration for hard work and loyalty.

While the narrative most intensely eyes the British residents, Indian locals permeate every story, even when unreferenced. Officers and soldiers are stationed in Simla to uphold the primacy of British sovereignty. References to the violent Indian uprising known as the Mutiny of 1857 and to recent Russian encroachments in the north serve as reminder of Britain's fear of losing control over the Indian subcontinent. Despite Kipling's later reputation as an unapologetic imperialist, the stories in *Plain Tales* and subsequent India-centric collections are empathic towards the locals.

At times his sarcasm might be misinterpreted as literal, leading to confusion between Rudyard Kipling, the precocious writer of ironic tales, and Rudyard Kipling, the older pro-Empire polemicist. In "Beyond the Pale", the opening paragraph, seemingly a stark commentary against interracial romance, is so shocking to modern eyes, that one might miss the adage that precedes it. The tale begins:

A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed. Let the White go to the White and the Black to the Black. Then whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things – neither sudden, alien, nor unexpected (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 134).

But the ensuing action bares the truth behind these words: each race has its bizarre rules and castigations that prevent genuine bonds between those willing to reach out. The quote that hovers above the opening, attributed as a Hindu proverb, attests to the irony of that brazen opening: “Love heeds not caste nor sleep a broken bed. I went in search of love and lost myself.” The story involves an Englishman, Trejago, who hears the cooing of an Indian girl, Bisesa, behind a grated window. She is a widow of fifteen, confined to home by her parents, but a flirtatious love grows between the two – they connect clandestinely at night by a shared love of the Tales of the Arabian Nights tales. Her love is genuine. His is unconsciously selfish: “Trejago swore that he loved her more than anyone else in the world. Which was true.” Word reaches Bisesa that he has been seen in the company of an English woman. Heartsick, she cries, “I know only this – it is not good that I should have made you dearer than my own heart to me, Sahib. You are an Englishman. I am only a black girl.” Troubled by the rupture in their relationship, he sneaks in one night and discovers that Bisesa’s hands have been cut off in punishment for her youthful love. Trejago is attacked by an unseen killer and cut near his groin. He escapes, and never again spots Bisesa in her home. The story ends with Trejago, his life ruptured by the horror of this cultural cataclysm, ostensibly returning to typical English company. To his fellow Brits, “There is nothing peculiar about him, except a slight stiffness, caused by a riding-strain, in the right leg.” But his near castration and her brutal outcome have impaired his self-regard. Had he continued to see Bisesa as a disposable flirtation, he might have regaled his peers with a variation of the truth. But his deceit about the limp keeps hidden what the narrator reveals, that, “Something horrible had happened, and the thought of what it must have been comes upon Trejago in the

night now and again, and keeps him company till the morning.” The limp is real but serves as a metaphor for another permanent wound (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 137-9).

Two years after *Plain Tales*, Kipling published the story, “Without Benefit of Clergy,” (Kipling, *The Man Who Would* 226-44), a profound culmination to “Beyond the Pale.” John Holden, an English official, falls in love with Ameera, a Muslim girl of sixteen. Their love is reciprocal, and she bears his child. The baby boy dies, and despair bonds their love tighter. Yet they remain unmarried. It would be unacceptable to both cultures and certainly to any officiating local clergyman. By necessity, her presence remains unknown to his fellow bureaucrats. When cholera strikes the region, despite his pleas she refuses to leave his side. She dies in his arms. From the view of his societal circle, she never existed. Even her mother, a greedy, heartless presence, responds to Ameera’s death by confiscating her nicer furniture and possessions. For Holden, his love is more genuine than any officially blessed wedding, either Anglican or Muslim. But, as the complex title shows, while John and Ameera believe that their love transcends a need for religious affirmation, the true benefit of clergy would have been approval of a mixed cultural union, a benediction far beyond the local Church of England’s mission.

Rudyard Kipling coined many phrases that have attached to English vernacular. Precociously, this flair began in *Plain Tales* with a simple expression so common that it is hard to believe it was authored. On six occasions, Kipling abruptly halts a vignette with these words: “But that's another story.” The spirit of this wry phrase – which might have been derived from a passing comment in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* but grew into an Empire-wide catchphrase via Kipling – implies bounteous options for further peeks inside British life in Simla. Its tacit purpose is to solidify the “fact” of

ongoing life at any particular moment. Within *Plain Tales* there is only a single story, that of the Raj in Simla, one that can be subdivided into a thousand and one tales, each a fragment of a unified whole. The poet and critic Randall Jarrell, who preferred late-period Kipling, offered this summary: “Only six or eight of the forty *Plain Tales from the Hills* are very good stories, and yet somehow the whole book is better than the best of the stories, and gives the reader a surprisingly vivid and comprehensive feeling of the society that produced it” (Page 138).

The Grounded Tale: where Fantasy and Realism merge

The contradictory title initiates our curiosity: “plain tales”. Tales promise a “once upon a time” quality that entwine fantasy with quotidian wishes. Tales are read to children in a surreal tone, as opposed to, say, the drier intonation of reciting a child’s biography of Willy Mays. Otherworldly characters (at times nameless or without a surname) confront earthly desires, their plights magnified by oral grandiloquence: “There once was a man who...”, “There lived a woman who...” The tone is near-mythical and designed to cast a spell. Tales skirt the refined details so essential to realism in order to sustain their hypnotic trance. As Scheherazade regaled her king in the wee hours for a thousand and one nights, classic tales echo the bedtime story with childlike simplicity, albeit with insinuations of the perils of adulthood. They are poetic and rhythmic. And tales work their magic with suasive brevity – not with terseness but with just enough background to lure the listener into imaginative cooperation. A teller of tales is an entertainer, and brevity sustains the rapture.

Irving Howe raised the issue in a laudatory essay:

For Kipling is one of the great performers of English literature, in this respect, at least, a successor to Dickens. These brightly colored early stories must always raise in one's mind uneasy questions about the relation between literature as spectacle and literature as vision, questions about how to value works in which spectacle is more striking than the vision is steady (Howe ix-xxxix).

Therefore, how can a tale be plain? For Rudyard Kipling the experiment was to create a narrative contradiction, a "grounded tale". To tag the noun "tales" with the adjective "plain" is to toy with the form. This oxymoron serves a dual purpose. It allows Kipling to satirize British pretensions of godlike stature, mocking the Raj's self-mythology versus the actual pettiness of bureaucracy. These ironic tales are a sharp elbow into the Raj's rationalization that, "We-appear-godlike-so-we-may-sustain-order," exposing the snarly truth that, "We-are-godlike-because-we-are-beginning-to-believe-it." But Kipling also wishes to honor unknown individuals whose noble choices and struggles deserve to be commemorated; there are stirring moments when the meaning behind the book's title pays tribute to those who display plain moral decency.

There is a further pun in the title, that of the plains versus the hills. The Raj's bureaucratic center was Calcutta, in the flatlands far to the east of India. The Viceroy, declaring Calcutta summers unbearable, made the startling decision to relocate the entire government to the cooler Simla for three months a year. One can conjecture what happens when scores of ambitious and flirtatious officers, wives, bureaucrats, and soldiers are granted annual freedom to shed one locale for another more sensuously beautiful. Hence, Kipling winks, the people from the coast/plains come to the hills for relief and escapades, leaving their traces in the form of prosaic tales.

After publishing dozens of brief quasi-fictional stories as part of his newspaper work, Kipling collected the best tales and ordered them for artistic effect rather than chronologically. For the first story, he made the extraordinary selection of “Lispeth” (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 5-9) How shocking it must have been in 1888 for white readers around the globe to begin a book with the tale of a native woman treated deceitfully by condescending English clergy. The opening words regale us with a near-mythical tone that quickly descends into the matter-of-fact:

She was the daughter of Sonoo, a Hill-man of the Himalayas, and Jadéh his wife. One year their maize failed, and two bears spent the night in their only opium poppy-field just above the Sutlej Valley on the Kotargh side; so, next season, they turned Christian, and brought their baby to the Mission to be baptized. The Kotargh Chaplain christened her Elizabeth, and ‘Lispeth’ is the Hill or pahari pronunciation (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 5)

It is a remarkable opening to the collection. An Indian woman is our focus rather than, say, a demure English lady. We are entranced by the poetic grace of the first sentence, yet swiftly sense their crippling poverty. But the latter half of the second sentence startles the most: two poor Indians convert to Christianity out of economic desperation rather than ideological fervor. We sense that their daughter’s name is essentially enforced by the Chaplain, but not her social standing, since the locals inadvertently recapture a portion of her identity with their pronunciation. Lispeth may have been born into a tug of war for her soul’s afterlife, but her earthly status is demeaned by both communities: “Her own people hated her because she had, they said, become a white woman,” but the Chaplain’s wife abhors Lispeth’s presumptions of equal stature. Conversion to Christianity may have saved her soul, but it did not make her a peer to the British.

As honor to her cruel circumstances – doubly cruel given her naïveté and faith that she could thrive among the British – this grounded tale limits identification only to Lispeth; we never learn the names of the Chaplain, his wife, or the British soldier with whom she falls in love. Lispeth becomes a legend, not to her people or the missionaries, but to the teller of the tale who has comprehended her humanity with a striking blend of detached journalistic observation and poetic prose. Only in the third paragraph does the narrator identify his presence – “Whether Christianity improved Lispeth, or whether the Gods of her own people would have done as much for her under any circumstances, I do not know; but she grew very lovely.” – and then he disappears until the close of the tale. Yet his sardonic voice arises throughout with candid commentary: when Lispeth rescues an injured British soldier, falls in love, and is thus berated by the Chaplain and his wife for her inappropriate longing, we read, “It takes a great deal of Christianity to wipe out uncivilized Eastern instincts, such as falling in love at first sight.” Lispeth has sinned. Not only does she love her young man, she declares herself betrothed by local custom. She has fallen in love as would any young English counterpart named Elizabeth. The young flirtatious soldier, encouraged to lie by the Chaplain’s wife, humors Lisbeth with false promises to return. Twice the Chaplain’s wife privately disparages Lispeth as a heathen or infidel even though she herself is the unkind deceiver. At the close, we discover that a heartsick Lisbeth deserts the mission, returns to her people, and marries an abusive Indian who destroys her beauty. The twist of this inverted tale is that Lispeth is not its tacit central character. The Raj is, for its overriding control has determined Lispeth’s fate. Kipling closes this brazen tragedy with a return to its opening poetic phrasings, leaving us with a final glimpse of an aged and depleted Lisbeth: “It was hard

to realize that the bleared, wrinkled creature, exactly like a wisp of charred rag, could ever have been ‘Lispeth of the Kotgarh Mission’.”

With “Lispeth”, Kipling initiated a tradition of preceding stories with a poem:

Look, you have cast out love! What Gods are these
 You bid me, please?
 The Three in One, the One in Three? Not so!
 To my own gods I go.
 It may be they give me greater ease
 Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities (Kipling, *Plain Tales*
 5)

This is stealthy artistry: by attributing the poem to an anonymous (and fictional) source, the author implies he is merely reporting an Indian view. Is this inappropriate, potentially slandering the Indian view of Christ? Or is this a youthful author’s brazen resourcefulness, satirizing his homeland’s faith with its presumptions of inerrancy? The answer is served within the story. Clearly, the clergyman and his shrewish wife come across as the least empathic characters in the tale.

One of Kipling’s most fascinating experiments with a grounded tale is the near-fable, “Thrown Away” (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 14-22). The story begins with a didactic prologue, presumably from our narrator, admonishing parents to chuck out the “sheltered life” style of child-rearing. It is best, we are advised, to let children make mistakes early rather than send them unprepared into a harsh world with an “ignorance of the proper proportion of things.”

The third paragraph launches the narrative with these words: “There was a Boy once who had been brought up under the ‘sheltered life’ theory.” Again, Kipling introduces his central character with the ethereal tone of a mystical tale. More remarkably, while he provides precise details of the Boy’s life – he’s English, from a

wealthy family, possesses an accommodating disposition, attends an elite military school, earns a junior officer's rank, is posted overseas to dismal places ("...where all the juniors were children and all the seniors old women"), and finally is sent to India – we never learn the Boy's name, thus sustaining the mystique of a tale.

Before proceeding with the Boy's foreshadowed downward spiral, the narrator treats us to a commentary on bureaucratic life in India:

Now India is a place beyond all others where one must not take things too seriously – the mid-day sun always excepted. Too much work and too much energy kill a man just as effectively as too much assorted vice or too much drink. Flirtation does not matter, because every one is being transferred, and either you or she leave the station and never return. Good work does not matter, because other men do worse, and incompetents hang on longer in India than anywhere else. Amusements do not matter, because you must repeat them as soon as you have accomplished them once, and most amusements only mean trying to win another person's money. Sickness does not matter, because it's all in the day's work, and if you die, another man takes over your place and your office in the eight hours between your death and burial...It's a slack country...and the wisest thing is to escape as soon as ever you can to some place where amusement is amusement and a reputation worth the having (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 15).

Despite its humor and contribution to the unifying ironies of *Plain Tales*, this aside is preparation for how the Boy's life will truly be scuttled: not, it turns out, through his parents' suffocating tenderness, but by the frivolousness of local values. The Boy does not know the proper proportion of things. He gambles, but unlike his peers, takes winnings and losses as serious responsibilities. He does not flirt so much as (we may presume) fall in love. One woman makes a callous comment, and his sensitive nature cannot abide. Depression sets in, and the Boy isolates himself until one morning he disappears into the countryside with a gun. A superior officer, a thoughtful man referred

to only as the Major, suspects the worst, and with two men and the narrator forms a search party. They discover the Boy's body in a cabin, dead from suicide.

It might be tempting to dismiss the opening paragraphs as unwanted moralizing. But further reflection reveals the oddity of this prologue. Suddenly the reader is confronted with a grimmer interpretation. What the narrator has ironically revealed is the shallowness of the British community. Suddenly, the implications of the "sheltered life" are inverted. We understand that the Boy was much loved and reared to value responsibility and duty, to believe in romance rather than heartless flirtation, to pay one's debts and presume collectibility of what's owed. *Plain Tales* is rife with such sarcasm, at times unbearably so – we are reminded that the author penned these stories between the ages eighteen and twenty-two. Despite Kipling's reputation as staunch Tory imperialist, when *Plain Tales* was published the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, "felt obliged to soothe Queen Victoria by countering, 'the unfair and rather malevolent impressions that have gone abroad and have received some color for the too cynical stories of Rudyard Kipling'" (Hitchens, *Love, Poverty, and War* 34).¹

At this moment, the narrative is once again inverted from expectations. The Major cannot bring himself to declare the Boy a suicide, and engineers an alternative ending. The Boy has died from cholera, he declares, and the body must be buried deep in the countryside. The Major has concocted a fat lie. Regardless, we do not doubt the Major's decision to conceive a plain tale of his own.

1. Hitchens was reviewing and citing David Gilmour's biography, *The Long Recession: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2002).

The story's title can be interpreted in different ways. Did the Boy's family stifle his chance for maturity? Did the Boy throw away his life? Did the Major throw away the Raj's insistence on bureaucratic efficiency? Each is possible. Such contemplations enrich the connective subtext within *Plain Tales*; as with "Thrown Away", we are tossed to and fro throughout the book, between the lure of fables and the specificity of realistic characters in Simla in 1888.

This story is mirrored in "A Bank Fraud" (Kipling, *Plain Tales*, 144-50) in which a local bank official, Reggie Burke, does not inform a dying employee that he has been fired. Reggie pays the man's salary out of his own pocket, forges glowing letters from the bank's directors, and withstands pompous lectures on efficiency from the sick man who does not know he's dying. What magnifies this brief character study of the senior manager is the unbearable arrogance of the employee. His self-importance and delusions of infallibility do not deter Reggie from carrying through with the deceit; Reggie, we are informed by our gossipy narrator, is two men, a bon vivant and a strict banker. But we learn that Simla's gossip has overlooked a third facet, that of a fine person who would tend to a dying man's vanity. Once again the implicit struggle is between duty to one's official role or to a higher moral calling, local customs be damned. In "Thrown Away", the presentation is that of a tale within the tale, a deceit that perpetuates a myth about the Boy, one to be dispersed around the community; in "A Bank Fraud", the details are of daily grind, of routine and crankiness and professional ineptitude. The tale is hidden within the prosaic story, spun by one good man for the unwitting audience of a dying man. The mortally ill fellow basks in a self-delusion of professional excellence, and Reggie's deceit further aggrandizes his lack of self-awareness. Who is Reggie or anyone

else to confront a dying man with the unpleasant truth of a failed work life? Reggie believes a false myth of grandeur is the only tale worthy for a dying man, and, regardless of the abuse heaped on him by the ungrateful employee, he never drops the façade.

Kipling authored further stories of India from 1888 until 1901, and his hunger for experimentation created numerous stories beyond the bureaucratic world of Simla. Two stories stand out for their experimentation. The first is “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” (1888) (Kipling, *The Man Who* 15-32). This bizarre tale, originally written at the age of nineteen and revised when twenty-two, is an early exploration of fantasy fiction to which Kipling returned throughout his career: Jukes, a British engineer, falls into a vast crater habited by ghoulish Indians mistakingly presumed deceased. The sides of the crater are steep, sandy, and impossible to escape. Jukes bumps into a Brahmin he had known years earlier, who had once been a supplicant to the British but now menaces the Englishman. Jukes must scrounge for food as if he was borne of the lowest caste. Despite his escape at the finale, the horrifying vision is clear: Jukes lives the subconscious nightmares of the Raj, of being overthrown, of facing the ultimate humiliation of rule by former subjects who impose a Hindu social order more punitive than that of the British. Perhaps Kipling had a political motive; did he believe the Indian caste structure so abhorrent that it should be forced out of existence, and thereby gave British readers a taste of the poverty of the lowest caste? Or did he simply tap into a bizarre vision of reversed supplication? Whatever the authorial intent, the story is memorable in the context of Kipling’s lifelong theme of societal collapse. Any reader might ask what constitutes a sane order: an arbitrary caste system? Or the abolishment of one?

Kipling's youthful experimentation culminated at the end of his remarkable 1888 with the long story, "The Man Who Would Be King" (Kipling, *The Man Who* 98-126), an adventure tale that serves as both parable for the British Empire and as character study. The poetic phrasing of the title suggests a tale, but the inverse of a plain one: the story is expansive and panoramic. We are told of adventures in a place unknown to the Brits, consequently the narrative offers a near-mythical tone. Therein we discover that unknown lands hold values both unique and universal.

Two British ex-army rascals determine to conquer, rule and pillage a small kingdom to the far side of the Hindu Kush. Against brutal odds, they conquer Kafiristan, and convince the locals that the dominant of the two, Daniel Dravot, is a god. Preparing to abscond with a fortune in jewels and gold, they are overcome with a sense of judicial and moral rectitude, and rule with Solomonic wisdom. Yet they are toppled when the natives realize the self-appointed King is mortal. "The Man who Would Be King" serves as a parable of the British Empire: entrepreneurial scoundrels with a hunger for wealth built the Empire – Robert Clive in India, Cecil Rhodes in South Africa – but as domination increased, the Empire grew troubled by the moral implications of such pillaging, and installed a judicial system with a sturdier sense of order. But Kipling asks how long before the locals comprehend the vulnerabilities of their rulers; he answers with this fable of false idols. When the locals see that the conquerors are mortal, they kill the king and crucify his friend. In other words, when the British believe their aggrandized myth they become susceptible to overthrow.

Yet the two central characters, Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan, are more than stand-ins for British military might. Each is drawn distinctly. Danny has greater

leadership skills but grows more contemplative. Peachey is as determined to rule as his comrade, but is more mercenary and rational. The actor Sean Connery, who played Daniel in the excellent John Huston adaptation, recalled Huston's insight that Daniel and Peachey are strongest when in sync as comrades, but falter when their friendship is ruptured by Daniel's myth-making. Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, Jr. objected to limiting interpretations of the story as either an adventure tale or metaphor for the British Empire, writing, "Matters of character, psychological development, and moral decision are inextricably involved with the action (Warren and Brooks, Jr. viii).

In addition, Kipling has expanded the complexity of a tale. A narrator – perhaps the journalist from *Plain Tales* – introduces the story with a recollection of meeting Danny and Peachey, reflecting on his obligations to them as fellow Freemasons, despite their criminal natures; then Peachey returns two years later, a broken, dying man with fierce punctures in his hands, to describe the intervening adventures, placing his tale of conquering Kafiristan within the larger narrative. His diction is wild, and we never know if madness has set in or if his exaggerations are charged by poetic rapture. Details of their military adventures are specific and believable; but descriptions of the panoramic Hindu Kush are delivered by Peachey in tale-like form: "And these mountains, they never keep still, no more than the goats. Always fighting they are, and don't let you sleep at night" (Kipling, *The Man Who* 111).

Daniel Dravot is killed for posturing as a god, and does so bravely. As local custom dictates, his body is decapitated. But Peachey is allowed to retain Danny's head with a gold crown atop, as a symbolic tribute to the universal values of honor, courage and perseverance. Again from Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren:

It is ironical that Dravot finally exercises his godlike power only in order to become a man – to satisfy his basic human desires [by marrying]. This step brings ruin, but there is further irony in the fact that Dravot becomes most truly kingly at the moment of his ruin...This the story involves a contrast between kinds of kingship, between kinds of power, external and internal, power over others and power over oneself...In “The Man Who Would Be King,” true kingship is found to lie in the exercise of power over the self” (Warren and Brooks Jr. 63-4).

Since Kipling’s time, literary tales have produced devoted and innovative modern acolytes. Italo Calvino penned wild fantasies that reflected on the art of storytelling. Jorge Luis Borges offered realistic details of surreal institutions and communities. Isak Dinesen broke the rules of brevity by creating less fantastical characters with genuine inner lives. Shirley Jackson’s eerie stories are tales of modern paranoia. Flannery O’Connor’s stories balance the barren details of the poor rural South with an eccentricity that verges on the surreal. John Barth’s early parodic novels are pastiche tales, half-tribute, half-postmodern satire – Barth cites Scheherazade, Don Quixote, and, interestingly, Huck Finn as his touchstones² (Kipling was a devoted admirer of Mark Twain). But the tale form has its detractors. For example, Harold Bloom questions the standing of tales in his critique of Shirley Jackson’s stories (with a sideswipe towards Poe), citing them as manipulative and worth only a single reading (Bloom, *Shirley Jackson* 9-10). And yet English literature was launched with Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, which, despite its prosaic details of infidelities, further sins, and revelries, celebrates the art of storytelling. Each speaker regales the others, and woe to a dullard who might bore the listeners (if there was such a dullard, Chaucer left him in Southwark

2. Correspondence with the author, October 29, 2014.

Cathedral). The two stalwarts of the early English novel, *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* each follow the structure of a tale, the former as a dream of Christian journey, the latter as a voyage adventure grounded by quotidian details of survival.

Frank O'Connor wrote an ambivalent critique of one of Kipling's greatest late stories, "The Gardener" (to be discussed in section three), acknowledging the genius of the piece, but deriding its sentimental finale and lack of psychological depth (O'Connor 97-110). But O'Connor's comments inadvertently address an issue beyond his own recognition: his critique is really of the very workings of a tale. O'Connor feels misled by Kipling, as if the story is emotionally manipulative and consequently undemanding. A counter-response might be (besides pointing out his essay's gratuitous digs at British imperialism, implicitly tarring Kipling with political guilt) that O'Connor demands either psychological realism or a children's story but not a tale blended with adult realism (he mentions a fondness for reading *The Jungle Books* to his children). "Kipling does not keep his eye on the object. He is not really thinking at all of that [character]...but of an audience and the effect he can create on an audience." He continues: "This oratorical approach, this consciousness of the individual reader as an audience who, at whatever cost to the artistic properties, must be reduced to tears or laughter or rage is characteristic of Kipling" (O'Connor 101). O'Connor does not acknowledge that Kipling's tales engage with psychology via immediate circumstances rather than through intense compilation of precise details. Kipling's tales are intended as visceral rather than cumulative. Work, action and response are his focus rather than interior life.

Henry James, despite his early championing of Kipling (as well as giving away the bride at Kipling's wedding), derided later work for an increasingly puerile tone. He

was disappointed that Kipling did not become England's Balzac, an astute and relentless chronicler of his society's subterranean motives (Lycett 448). But James' most durable characters are not famed for their work habits – quite the opposite. He does not depict the petty or powerful temperaments of one engaged in productivity. The concepts of work, effort, diligence, and entrepreneurial ambition are as alien to James as they are integral to Kipling's stylized tales.

In 1983, Jorge Luis Borges visited Johns Hopkins University and discussed his work and favorite writers. To the surprise of the audience, he lauded Kipling, both for prose and poetry. When asked to describe his love of Kipling, he responded, "Most people think of Kipling as a writer of boys' stories." He paused, and one might have anticipated a follow-up such as, "He was more than that." Instead, the elderly author smiled and said, "I'd love to be remembered as a writer of boys' stories."³ What Borges was acknowledging is the memorable power of the tale. Children never forget Kipling's *The Jungle Books* or *Just-So Stories*, just as they forever recall the seminal works of Lewis Carroll or Mark Twain. For adults, the lure of sophisticated tales is as enticing in the hands of masters such as Dinesen or Melville or a sly yet empathic Rudyard Kipling.

Back Story: Concision and Inclusion

The urge to provide detailed histories of characters raises quandaries for any author. What information should be provided? Should a character's background lead the story or interweave through the narrative? Amos Oz suggests that short story authors should pen the history of their central characters, and, when the present story is ready to

3. Jorge Luis Borges, video of his lecture at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1983.

begin, excise the preliminaries (Oz 1-10). This issue resides at the core of literary short fiction: how can backstory illuminate without stealing from the emotional impact?

Rudyard Kipling is a master of concise backstory, utilizing the tale as a solution. As an example, in his moving late story, “The Gardener”, twenty years are covered in five opening pages. The provided history is not only emotionally moving, it is essential to the narrative: the last lines of the story inform us that the backstory was a ruse, a tale of deceit to disguise embarrassing fact.

V.S. Pritchett, the noted short story writer and literary essayist, offered this incisive view of Kipling’s gifts for concision and immediacy:

Kipling is not one of those short-story writers who settle on a mere aspect of a subject, a mood, an emotion or a life. He takes the whole subject and reduces it, in form, to the dramatic skeleton...the effect is of extent, panorama and crowded life. One explanation lies on Kipling’s genius for conveying place and physical presence (Pritchett 597).

In *Plain Tales*, lives are outlined with swift delineation, yet the central characters’ actions feel genuine rather than arbitrary. Pritchett again, on Kipling’s fictional depictions: “They have no character; they have, simply, a fate” (Pritchett 597). A common technique is Kipling’s narrator offering chatty backstory, then moving swiftly into this specific moment – history merges with the-here-and-now. The details are unobtrusive because we have been regaled with the lure of storytelling. Kipling does not present backstory as essential to comprehending the present narrative moment. Rather, he creates the tale of a character. Details can be amusing, poignant, satirical, unnerving, but are presented swiftly, in “There once was a man who” style. Let’s examine two key themes within *Plain Tales*, and witness how Kipling unobtrusively interweaves backstory:

1. The British belittle Indian rituals, unaware that they practice similar customs in respect to courtship and marriage and a caste system that dictates social parameters.
2. Camaraderie is honorable when offered supportively rather than through societal imperative. This applies equally to soldiers and bank officers.

The first theme – ironically referring to Indian traditions as barbaric and then displaying British rituals that ape these intractable customs – recurs throughout the series, further unifying the collective narrative. For example, modern eyes might wince at this moment from “His Chance in Life”, which is the backstory of current British prejudice:

The Black [Indian] and White mix very quaintly in their ways. Sometimes the White shows in spurts of fierce, childish pride – which is Pride of Race run crooked – and sometimes the Black in still fiercer abasement and humility, half-heathenish customs and strange, unaccountable impulses to crime (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 63).

Swiftly we know of tensions between cultures. Yet the snobbism of this story’s central character, an Indian who “looked down on natives as only a man with seven-eighths native blood in his veins can,” is mirrored by the arrogance of numerous British characters obsessed by their social standing and the strictures of courting. The story highlights that even a hint of questionable pedigree can alter the perceived benefits of a prospective marital partner for both Indian and British.

In “False Dawn”, the brief second paragraph establishes the impending conflict (even if the reader disagrees:

Never praise a sister to a sister, in the hope of your compliments reaching the proper ears, and so preparing the way for you later on. Sisters are women first, and sisters afterwards; and you will find that you do yourself harm (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 39).

“Cupid’s Arrows”, involving matchmaking in the form of an archery contest, opens with a near-tribute to Jane Austen, a favorite author of Kipling’s:

Once upon a time there lived at Simla a very pretty girl, the daughter of a poor but honest District and Sessions Judge. She was a good girl, but could not help knowing her power and using it. Her Mamma was very anxious about her daughter’s future, as all good Mammams should be...When a man is a Commissioner and a bachelor, and has the right of wearing open-work jam-tart jewels in gold and enamel on his clothes, and of going through a door before every one except a Member of Council, a Lieutenant-Governor, or a Viceroy, he is worth marrying. At least, that is what ladies say (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 52).

The reader swiftly suspects that an attractive young lady with a strong character is being forced into a loveless marriage. A few sentences later, after we have been introduced to the unwanted suitor, Kipling wastes no time: “His name Saggott – Barr-Saggott – Anthony Barr-Saggott and six letters to follow. Departmentally, he was one of the best men the Government of India owned. Socially, he was like unto a blandishing gorilla” (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 52). Subtle, no. The young lady escapes Barr-Saggott and runs off with her true love – all in four pages.

The second theme of camaraderie is highlighted in numerous tales involving “the Soldiers Three” as well as the aforementioned bank executive and the army major, all unified by their loyalty to fallen comrades, even at the expense of rules they are obliged to uphold. Another example is “The Bronckhorst Divorce-Case” (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 186-91), in which a middle-aged army officer tires of his lengthy marriage:

Bronckhorst was not nice in any way. He had no respect for the pretty public and private lies that make life a little less nasty than it is. His manner towards his wife was coarse...making light of her weaknesses, her headaches, her small fits of gaiety, her dresses, her queer little attempts to make herself attractive to her husband (Kipling, *Plain Tales* 186).

Immediately we know much: the town has rules, he disobeys them, he is a lout, and his wife is passive and perhaps frantic. Bronckhorst brings a divorce case against his wife, falsely citing another man as the cause, and bribes several Indian house staff to fabricate testimony, thereby allowing a clear and inexpensive path out of his marriage. Suspecting the fraud, several men, including our narrator, hire Strickland to disguise as an Indian and ferret out the truth. He does so, and threatens the house staff to speak the truth when under oath. Bronckhorst's case falls apart, and Simla is delighted. The English have clearly reasoned that Mrs. Bronckhorst, despite her fealty for such an awful husband, has been wronged as has the alleged lover. She takes her husband back, but not before the falsely accused lover beats the tar out of Bronckhorst. The town tacitly deems this just; less just is the continuance of the marriage of such a passive and naïve woman to such an unpardonable lout.

As mentioned, one of Kipling's techniques is the use of gossip, both overt and tacit. Gossip is backstory, formatted for whispering with false assurances of privacy. The British appraise each other through chitchat, with invitations or the lack of one, through bickering and power struggles and sadistic jokes. The characters gossip amongst themselves, working with limited data, and we too question what one can truly know of any character, fictional or real. At times, the gossip is overt: examples include "Kidnapped", "Three and an Extra", "Miss Youghal's Sais", "In the Pride of His Youth".

Other stories imply tacit gossip behind the scenes: “His Wedded Wife”, “Beyond the Pale”, “Venus Annodomini”.

Could *Plain Tales* be labeled naturalism? The characters do respond to place and social strata. But the brevity of each story disavows the possibility of significant change – there is no time to evolve, only to respond and reveal. And the naturalism among Kipling’s contemporaries implies social commentary beyond satire. The immediacy of a Kipling character’s situation reflects the response of a single moment. Armed only with gossip and social awareness, the reader is placed in the same position as central characters.

Is it realism? While Simla is real, the presentation is skewed by our narrator’s wry and assertive perspective. Perhaps the moniker most adept in capturing *Plain Tales* is pointillistic. From afar we see a community, but closer inspections ferret out the minute details that compose the whole.

For critics more attuned to incisive character studies, swiftly presented backstory may be deemed psychologically shallow. Critics have derided Kipling for skimming across the human soul without delving deeper. Like Henry James, James Joyce treasured *Plain Tales*, but felt ensuing stories in the 1890s forfeited psychological growth (Joyce believed the three most innately gifted nineteenth-century writers were Kipling, Tolstoy, and d’Annunzio) (Page, 37).

Virginia Woolf deplored a perceived boyish and colloquial vulgarity in Kipling’s prose (Ricketts 355). It is easy to conjecture that these three artists whose fictions pursued richer introspections to the level of granularity would recoil at the sight of a literature devoted to action and response. Herein lies vital questions: is there ever an advantage for

a writer to forego introspection? Does an inward-aimed telescope rob the clarity of an outward one? Can a lack of psychological rumination aide a story's ability to grip a reader? With just enough backstory to glue the reader's posterior to an armchair, the young Kipling created works of pure imagination with few overt introspections. As a grand storyteller, he rewarded readers by trusting them to their own introspections.

Angus Wilson, author of a once-defining biography of Kipling, found a lacking quality in several famed stories. In an essay from The Kipling Society's journal in 2008, Wilson's views were encapsulated by critic Lisa Lewis:

Wilson suggests that Kipling shirked self-knowledge, feeling that:

'You must only weave tapestries when an external observation has set up a shape or a story in your mind, don't let the stories grow out of yourself. This belief led him for so much of his life to an off-putting philistinism, a false dichotomy between action and thought. But it also made him the remarkable writer that he is, for in attempting the impossible, a purely externally orientated art, he produced stories in new areas and exploited themes untouched by other writers. Yet it also stood in the way of his developing into one of the greatest writers, because he feared to follow his doubts and anxieties and haunting sense of guilt deep into himself, where their sources surely lay' (Lewis, *Kipling Journal*, January 16, 2008).

Wilson's work was published in 1978 when Freudian ideals still ruled literary biography. With much of Freudian psychoanalysis debunked over the ensuing decades,⁴ is it possible that Kipling's approach gains in durability and avoids the taint of self-indulgence? Is this what Orwell refers to when he acknowledges Kipling's tenacity on the bookshelves?

4. For a fascinating account of the rise and fall of "unassailable" Freudianism, see Dr. Paul McHugh's *The Mind Has Mountains* (The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 2005).

Perhaps Kipling's most brilliant use of backstory is the late story "The Gardener" (1924) (Kipling, *The Wish House* 404-12). The entirety of the twenty-year life of Michael Turrell with his Aunt Helen is covered in five pages. After this run-up to the present date, the story closes a mere four pages later. At the close, a befuddling comment is made to Helen that forces the reader to review the backstory and realize the provided details were a deception. Initially we had been lured by the compelling saga – the tale of Michael Turrell and his Aunt Helen. A second reading reveals the tale as a deceit, a myth spun by Helen for so long that she nearly believes it. Initially the reader finds the backstory engaging – it is the story of an entire relationship from birth to death. But the second reading uncovers the true family history. Kipling reveals the painful story underneath the proffered one, and each version engages the reader for differing reasons: the former for the power of the tale, the latter for revelations about the false life spawned by that tale.

Frank O'Connor's Kipling essay, acerbically titled "You and Who Else", zeroes in on "The Gardener" with the intense ambivalence notable among Kipling's critics (O'Connor 97-110). He begins the essay stating that the story is "clearly a masterpiece", and ends with, "As a mature [adult] I know Kipling is a damned liar" (O'Connor 109). Ambivalence indeed. As O'Connor digs selectively into "The Gardener" and additional stories, he draws a conclusion as to the source of his quandary: "When Kipling should be moving in the direction of Chekhov he always moves in the direction of Poe," concluding that, "...a condition which at once distinguishes Kipling from every other great writer of stories...He cannot write about the one, subject a storyteller must write about – human loneliness" (O'Connor 109). This view has validity for Kipling's least commendable

work, but is dubious for his most supreme stories, including “The Gardener”, in which the false backstory triggers a profound loneliness.

Certainly O’Connor’s conclusion is disavowed by one of Kipling’s most surreal stories, “The Wish House” (1924) (Kipling, *The Man Who*, 482-96). Here the primary backstory is expressed in dialogue between two late-middle-aged English working class women, one of whom is a likely allusion to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath. Clearly this is a rightful tribute: Kipling, the spinner of grounded tales, pays tribute to the father of English literature and his tales. “The Wish House” depicts two domestic workers, one nearing blindness, the other suffering, it initially appears, from an ulcerative leg. These former close friends have spent little time together for many years, and, while dining on simple food, they gab. The story is half finished when the conversation opens up to admittance of failed love affairs. Mrs. Fettley daubs her fading eyes, mostly keen to chat about herself, but listens carefully when her friend, Mrs. Ashcroft, opens up about her love life. Mrs. Ashcroft reveals details of an illicit love with a younger man who forsook their affair to return to his mother’s country village home. Then she reveals her experience with the Wish House, a dingy London home with an unseen groaning creature on the inside of the front door. The secret of the Wish House is this: one may plead with this ugly-sounding presence – is it a devil, the Devil, a bizarre angel, a mystical conjuring? – to assume the suffering of a loved one. Despite her young man’s rejection, when Mrs. Ashcroft learned of his severe illness, she visited the Wish House and asked to absorb her former lover’s pain. We realize she is dying from his cancer without remorse or complaint. Mrs. Fettley realizes that they likely will never see each other again, and restricts her final comments to tender recognition of her friend’s selflessness. The story

is partly a sensitive vision of Christian co-inherence, partly a ghoulish tale of the pains of failed love, partly a realistic depiction of elderly friendship. Mrs. Ashcroft, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, captures her audience with a tale of illicit love for a younger man, nurses a leg wound, and is a retired cook. The collective impact of "The Wish House" is a tribute to storytelling when it evokes candor and painful but honorable self-revelation.

Kipling's most famous novel, *Kim*, dramatizes the same dilemma as two other notable long works, *The Jungle Books* and *Captains Courageous*, that of a boy separated from parents and at the mercy of helpless circumstances, but ever-hopeful for spiritual and moral guidance. This theme first presented itself in the tortuous autobiographical short story, "Baa Baa Black Sheep" (1888) (Kipling, *The Man Who*, 75-97), a story of unceasing emotional distress clearly based on biographical circumstance: after a happy early childhood in India, Kipling's beloved parents chose to board him and his sister with an unknown family in Hampshire. Kipling was six years old. The custom of Anglo-Indian families sending children to England to avoid illness and crippling heat was common, however biographers remain uncertain why the Kiplings chose not to send Rudyard and his sister to live with relatives. For the next six years, the children were subjected to physical and psychological abuse in what Kipling always referred to as 'The House of Desolation.' In fact, the couple that took in the Kipling children set their thuggish older son to regularly beat the diminutive Rudyard, seemingly out of resentment over his intellectual interests and sharp tongue, and the housemother's religious zeal.

Note that the title of the story is an allusion to a children's poem; and the fictional siblings refer to each other as Punch and Judy. This is a children's story inverted into

sadistic terror. The children are pitted against each other, and Punch is deprived of glasses, never understanding the severity of his myopia. He loves his sister, and longs for the end of abuse. But the psychological torture is ceaseless, and the boy grows unbalanced and paranoid, nearing a nervous-breakdown. The childhood names become less about playful affection and more about needful fantasies to cling onto sanity. Memories of past happiness become their own tale. Backstory becomes self-definition and perhaps self-delusion.

For Kipling, the act of storytelling holds a mystique on its own merits. Storytelling is revelatory. Interweaving backstory as the tale of a character – whether the details are true or false – is the very artistry of storytelling.

A Volatile Man Transformed

The compulsion to learn more about this unstable and wildly contradictory personality has lead to further insights into the creative process. While seemingly extraneous to the literary influences detailed in this paper, Kipling's writing process and daily transformation are of compelling interest, particularly in how several later stories attempt to resolve personal turmoil that leaked into earlier stories. How did such a volatile, unstable, bigoted, and damaged man create works of empathy? How did he master his hostilities while writing? Rudyard Kipling was possessed with an unstable temperament, one rife with impulsive anger; yet when isolated in his creative process, his "daemon", as he called it, appeared, a voice that often transformed his neurotic anger into a surprisingly empathic vision – although at times he penned stories of sadism that, unlike, say, Dickens, seem to revel in inflicted pain. Kipling's advice to young writers: let the daemon take over, then "...do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, and obey"

(Sergeant 15).⁵ Noting Kipling's erratic nature, Angus Wilson, author of the once-notable biography, isolates his "...delicacy of craft and violence of feeling, exactitude and wild Impressionism, subtlety and true innocence" (Wilson 343). Randall Jarrell summarized the difficulty of placing Kipling in a cubbyhole:

Kipling, like it or not, admit it or not, was a great genius; and a great neurotic; and a great professional, one of the Writer's who other writers exclaim, in the queer tone they use for the exclamation: "Well, I've got to admit it really is *written*" (Jarrell 335).

Any author attempting to convert internal unpleasanties into empathic fiction might benefit from studying Kipling's daily professional transformation – a process that he claimed mystified him – and how the older Kipling crafted stories that at times responded to his youthful self.

V. S. Pritchett – who lived to age ninety-seven – addressed the perils of lengthy literary endeavor: "As they grow older, short-story writers tend to repeat themselves as Maupassant or Maugham did; Kipling escaped this by his variety and his boldness with usually intractable subjects and by increasing his difficulties" (Pritchett 949). Two of Kipling's later stories seem to address the psychological turbulence that dripped onto his youthful pages. Each involves a troublesome issue: "The Church That Was at Antioch" engages with a quality notably absent in his early works, forgiveness; and "Dayspring Mishandled" inverts the outcome of a practical joke, the kind of sadistic chicanery that recurs throughout Kipling's body of work.

"The Church That Was at Antioch" (1929) (Kipling, *A Kipling Pageant* 820-838).

5. Sergeant is citing Kipling's posthumously published memoir, *Something of Myself*.

involves the early Christian figures of Peter and Paul as they debate and struggle over the future of their nascent faith. The protagonist is neither man, but a Roman policeman named Valens who must find solutions to uprisings between Hebrew Christians versus converts with Greco-Roman customs and Jews who wish to scuttle the splinter faith. Valens is attacked by a vengeful youth who wishes to avenge his revolutionary brother's death at the policeman's hands, but Valens forgives and releases the assailant, understanding his hurt. Valens' faith is Mithraicism, and as he overhears Peter and Paul arguing over strategy, he points out that their faith has borrowed from his – or at least they overlap in concerns. Paul is blessed with confidence but hampered by arrogance. Peter is cursed by indecisiveness, his thoughts riddled by memories of betraying Jesus in front of Roman centurions, but as the story progresses he transcends fear and troubled rumination, and unifies the unruly crowd. Valens is stirred by their words, despite fealty for his polytheistic religion. As the story closes, the assassin attacks again and critically stabs Valens. Roman guards prepare to kill the young man but Valens asks to spare his life. His dying words empathize with the locals and their anger: "Don't be hard on them...They get worked up...They don't know what they are doing" (Kipling, *A Kipling Pageant* 837). Forgiveness and empathy can be inspired within any faith, it seems, leading to transcendent behavior.⁶

6. It should be noted that Kipling's anti-Semitism – which grew virulent with age – appears to creep into this story, and, if detected, leaves readers with this choice: ignore the tacit implications and marvel at the prose, or feel a queasiness that no aesthetic beauty than erase. If opting for the former, the experience of reading the story complements its topic of forgiveness.

In “Dayspring Mishandled” (1928) (Kipling, *The Man Who*, 506-22), plotting a revenge consumes a hack writer, Manallace, partly because his target is a successful former co-worker, the pretentious and brutal Castorley, but mostly because Castorley has insulted the memory of the deceased woman that Manallace loved and lost twice – to another man, then to a painful death). His plan: since Castorley has become a renowned Chaucer scholar and Manallace has honed expertise in printing and inking, he will create a brilliant forgery, lure Castorley into authenticating the work, then expose him as a fool. It is fun to surmise that the idea of this literary hoax began as yet another gleeful revenge tale from Rudyard Kipling, and had it been in the hands of the precocious author of *Plain Tales*, surely Castorley would have had his comeuppance. But an older author, aged sixty-three, holds the pen. Manallace grows weary of his multi-year plan given his target’s fading health. And he grows suspicious of Castorley’s wife and her insistence on a swift publication of his findings. Upon investigation, Manallace suspects she knows of the fraud and wishes to expedite her husband’s humiliation and death (in fact, she is having an affair with her husband’s doctor). Instead of carrying out his exquisitely plotted revenge, Manallace refuses.

Castorley dies with false belief in his inerrancy. As in “A Bank Fraud”, a deception of professional excellence is sustained for a loathsome dying man. But the protagonist is less akin to that early story’s protagonist. Manallace becomes a tragic figure more akin to Dickens’ misguided Richard Carstone from *Bleak House*: despite innate generosity, he has wasted his life’s energy. Ambitions and work have been shunned. Delivering a well-deserved comeuppance, he belatedly discovers, is not a source of glee. Rather, it is an indication of a fouled soul. After penning decades of

revenge tales with few consequences, from the bureaucrats of *Plain Tales* to the mischievous Stalky and his schoolmates in stories ostensibly for pre-teens, Kipling finalized this story with the severest conclusion of all, that a man sullies his own character until he eradicates the yearning for vengeance. Consequences fall most destructively on the perpetrator than the targeted victim. Despite O'Connor's critique, this is moving towards Chekhov and away from Poe.

Numerous biographies reveal Kipling's volatile temperament, one whose trajectory worsened with age into virulent anti-Semitism, racist contempt, fierce disdain towards Germans versus a blind adoration of the French, and fury towards suggestions that the British Empire be dismantled. Any biography of Kipling will reveal a mind as politically incorrect as can be by early 21st Century standards – the poet and essayist Craig Raine has written a breakdown of Kipling's prejudices, and it makes for loathsome reading⁷ (this paper won't tackle the fascinating subject of why Kipling's bigotries are singled out versus so many of his literary contemporaries whose off-the-page racist and anti-Semitic slurs match Kipling's yet have avoided the critical assaults hellbent on marring his stature). For an author whose works appear disengaged from psychoanalytic rumination, is it worth a dip into a fathomless sea of conjecture? Was Kipling born turbulent? Or did his forced orphanhood corrupt his stability? Whatever the sources of his volatility, he appears to have lived in a chronic state of psychological collapse, as if at any second his internal fortitude would implode and reveal terror, only terror. Early Kipling (1885-1890) reveals a creative genius whose innate gifts trump the corruptions of

7. Craig Raine, opening essay to Rudyard Kipling's *The Wish House and Other Stories*, xiii-xxxiv.

anxiety. Middle Kipling (1891-1914) is a display of bizarre highs and lows, from longer masterpieces such as *The Jungle Books* and *Kim* and works that might appeal to a reader's imagination such as *Captains Courageous* to the least engaging short stories in his fifty years of authorship. Later Kipling (1915-1935) displays an experimental mind and (at times) maturing heart, one ever-at-battle with his temperament but eager to dig deeper into richer loam.

At the close of "Baa Baa, Black Sheep", Punch and Judy are reunited with their mother. Judy comments that now, finally, life can return to normal. But an omniscient voice materializes for the closing paragraph, voicing a thought that might sum up how a once-abused child is never quite freed from hell:

When young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate,
Suspicion and Despair, all the Love in the World will not wholly
take away that knowledge; though it may turn darkened eyes for a
while to the light, and teach Faith where no Faith was (Kipling,
The Man Who 97).

While these concluding lines may reflect the truest self-awareness within Kipling's body of work, critics offer disparate views how to interpret the impact of the 'House of Desolation'. Randall Jarrell goes so far as to say, "Kipling was someone who had spent six years in a concentration camp as a child; he never got over it" (Jarrell 338). Christopher Hitchens deplores Kipling's politicized prose and verse in one collection of essays (Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation* 149-59), then comes to both understand the "appalling cruelty" of Kipling's time in the 'House of Desolation' and admire his verse (proceed by a private reading with Borges) (Hitchens, *Love, Poverty* 29-41). Frank O'Connor concludes otherwise: since Punch is horrified to discover Jewish and dark-skinned classmates in his Hampshire school, O'Connor concludes that young Kipling

possessed an innately sour and difficult temperament before his banishment to the ‘House of Desolation’ (O’Connor 106).⁸ And it may have been so: hence the perils of psychological sleuthing through fiction. However, the insights of W.H. Auden into the anxious nature of Kipling’s politics should be cited for their potential acuity:

...while virtually every other European writer since the fall of the Roman empire has felt that the dangers threatening civilization came from inside that civilization...Kipling is obsessed by a sense of danger from outside. Others have been concerned with the corruption of the big city, the ennui of the cultured mind; some sought a remedy in a return to Nature, to childhood, to Classical Antiquity...In Kipling there is none of this, no nostalgia for a Golden Age, no belief in Progress. For him civilization (and consciousness) is a little citadel of light surrounded by a great darkness full of malignant forces and only maintained through the centuries by everlasting vigilance, willpower and self-sacrifice (Howe, citing Auden on page xv).

Kipling was notorious for destroying personal letters – he requested friends destroy his correspondence, and terminated relationships when personal comments were cited to newspapers, even seemingly innocuous ones. One morning, while burning a set of letters returned from an ex-friend, his publisher Frank Doubleday witnessed the fireplace inferno, and cried out, “What about posterity?” Kipling responded, “Exactly,” adding, “No one’s going to make a monkey out of me after I die.”⁹ His work was his statement. The closing of “Baa Baa Black Sheep” is the singular moment when the

8. More amusingly, academic Deirdre Levinson Bergson points out that Punch never blames his parents for sending him thousands of miles from home, yet favorably cites his father as one who would have deplored the Jewish children for living above their families’ shops. She concludes that, “The 23-year-old Kipling evidently knows no more about Punch’s true feelings than Punch knows.” (From *Kipling and Beyond*, ft. 32).

9. Cited by a guide in a tour of Kipling’s East Sussex home, Bateman’s, July 2014.

author revealed what he wished us to know. And those words were likely the lesson he needed to learn and relearn every day of his adult life.

Christopher Hitchens and others have referred to Kipling's "permanent contradictions", and the list is lengthy and bizarre: the imperialist who mocked the Raj, the anti-Irish author whose most famous novel's central character is an Irish boy, the poet behind "Recessional" who derided fake piety and the Church of England clergy, the anti-Semite with Jewish "brothers" in Freemasonry, the creator of adventures of crude soldiers in horrific battles whose favorite author was Jane Austen, the scornful writer who loathed Bloomsbury modernism but penned the modernist "Mrs. Bathurst" as well as "Mary Postgate" in which a vengeful woman has an orgasm watching a German soldier die, the close friend of Cecil Rhodes and George V who consistently declined a knighthood and poet laureateship and wrote sympathetically of common daily plights, the strident supporter of Empire who exposed British foolishness, and the hyper-imperialist pounding the table for the Empire's noble and essential purpose who mocked the Empire's bureaucracy for its pretenses of supremacy.

Given the centrality of India in his writings, his later personal views are often presumed to infiltrate his fiction, and have led to scorching literary battles. Edward Said wrote a famed essay on Kipling's *Kim* (Said 132-62) that derided the novel's presumption of British permanency, all the while doubling back to laud the novel's creative and aesthetic beauty. The Indian-English critic Ibn Warraq slammed into Said's essay, believing its interpretation completely misidentified the nature of Kipling's genius (Warraq) as did Harish Trivedi who itemized line-by-line rebuttals of Said's views (Trivedi 120-43). Those who know little of Kipling's India tales presume an imperial

noblesse oblige, because his personal comments – private more than public – feed the bizarre misconception that his India stories lack irony. Quotes that sting the modern eye are littered throughout *Plain Tales*, but any engaged reader will spot that ironies abound in Kipling's Indian tales, often overwhelmingly so.

The only thing more engaging than watching critics war over interpretations is watching the same critic war within himself. It is one matter for Christopher Hitchens to view "Mary Postgate" as an exercise in horrifying sadism versus others who identify Mary's sexual release as modernistic. It is dramatically different to read Hitchens assault on Kipling in 2000 versus his more laudatory essay in 2004 (the contradiction may stem from Hitchens preference for Kipling the poet versus the short story writer, but the magnitude is notable). Henry James, James Joyce and Leonard Woolf have been cited as expressing marked ambivalence towards Kipling. Edmund Wilson, who initiated a revival of critical interest in Kipling's later short stories, acknowledged "the intolerant and vindictive views which, emerging with the suddenness of a snapping turtle, he sometimes gave vent in public" (Wilson 344). Max Beerbohm detested Kipling's work and compulsively assaulted his reputation, but when offered the opinion that the author was a genius, responded, "Even *I* can't help *knowing* him to be that" (Page ix). C.S. Lewis summarized critical perspectives succinctly: "Kipling is intensely loved and hated. Hardly any reader likes him a little" (Page xiii).¹⁰ At the time of Kipling's death, George Orwell wrote, "For my own part I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five and now rather admire

10. Lewis was an admirer, referring to Kipling as "a very great writer" (Page xiv).

him” (Orwell 38).¹¹ Lionel Trilling attacked T.S. Eliot’s thesis that Kipling was not an anti-Semite, but later penned an essay that – with ambivalence – detailed the pleasures of Kipling’s gifts; on *Plain Tales* boyish exuberance, Trilling writes, “Kipling himself was not much more than a boy when he wrote these remarkable stories – remarkable because, no matter how one judges them, one never forgets the least of them” (Trilling 85-96). But why should any of this surprise us? In Kipling’s final short story collection, *Limits and Renewals*, we read “Beauty Spots” (1932), yet another tale of petty revenge that seems to have amused its author, alongside the notable “Dayspring Mishandled” which addresses the tragedy of such amusement (Kipling, *Limits* eBook). According to Andrew Lycett’s biography, T. S. Eliot’s “acutest remark was...‘The mind is not yet sufficiently curious, sufficiently brave, to examine Mr. Kipling,’ implying that there were aspects of Rudyard’s work that might take years to fathom” (Lycett 675). Perhaps it is impossible to read Rudyard Kipling without intense ambivalence: his roiling internal battles just might remind us of our own.

Given his revealed private bigotries, should readers impose this sad knowledge on the prose, or is it wiser to isolate Kipling's artistry from his erratic views? A less obvious but more enlightened question might be: if choosing to contend with the private world of this author, shouldn't the reader also be aware that Rudyard Kipling, that spewing volcano of anxieties and contradictions, vocalized opinions that were often fictionalized with opposite sympathies, that he was so aware of the dangers of his impulsivity that even he was stunned by what his empathic daemon transcribed onto the page?

11. Orwell was nearly thirty-three when this article was published.

John Irwin, former chair of the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins, once commented, “You can never meet the brilliant author you love, because he becomes a different person when alone in a room with nothing but a pen, paper, solitude, and time. He won’t be that person when you meet him outside that room” (lecture at The Johns Hopkins University, October 2012). Kipling’s ironically named “daemon” seemed to tame the anger of his unwieldy and fierce disposition, and at its most transcendent freed the complex spirit of a supreme storyteller.

Let us allow Rudyard Kipling to script the final words of this essay on literary influence (truly final, as this poem, “The Appeal”, was discovered among his papers and published after his death):

If I have given you delight
By aught that I have done,
Let me lie quiet in that night
Which shall be yours anon:

And for the little, little, span
The dead are borne in mind,
Seek not to question other than
The books I leave behind.

My Original Fiction

I am writing a series of short stories about relationships and self-reflections within a retirement community (yes, it's in Florida). Although this home for the aged was originally designated for Jewish residents, its mix has changed over the past years, given Jewish and Christian intermarriage, and outside and inside pressures to open doors for non-religious purposes. Even the Jewish residents cannot agree on their definition of a Jew. One might spot a metaphor for Israel, but this will not be walloped over readers’

skulls with presumptions of profundity; rather, readers can observe and explore their own views and sentiments on a variety of complex topics.

After decades of wide reading and observation, influences can be traced to eclectic sources, but the structure of the book is modeled with Rudyard Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* in mind:

- 1) Vignettes will accrete to the feel of a novel, given repeat appearances by characters, overlapping narratives, and a single locale in which characters feel both protected and trapped. Most of the stories can be read as self-contained narratives. The book is designed for readers to consume a chapter with a sense of completion – but the narrative will converge into an encompassing finale in which all lives are forever altered.
- 2) The “tale” form is utilized in both ironic and noble ways. Some behavior is petty and intransigent, some is ennobling; the usage of the “plain tale” will capture both. These stories are not overtly imitative of the youthful Kipling's mocking tone, however many of the characters, mostly older Jewish Americans, have their own contributions to make in the realm of ironic chat and commentary. More importantly, every elderly person is the subject of many tales: the ones they hope will be told after their deaths and are imposed with intense regularity, the ones their children and grandchildren tell (often with opposite narratives) but might modify over time, and the ones relayed by peers in the retirement home. Every elderly person hopes to live on through tales of their noble character and grand achievements, yearning for such stories to be passed down the ages – and every elderly person is confronted by versions that don't jibe with the desired one, hence

the near-desperate tone of their stories. We will come to understand how characters see themselves versus how they are perceived. After two or three generations, most people are recalled with a handful of adjectives (“He was shrewd but charitable”, “She was charming and kind to people. Loved dogs.”) and a like number of anecdotes (“Your Uncle Marty liked to sit around the pool naked.” “Did you know your late Aunt Miriam was the first woman in our family to earn a PhD?”). Controlling those adjectives and anecdotes are a prime battlefield among the elderly and their immediate descendants.

- 3) Backstory pops up at unusual times: readers will discover the inner-workings of characters in ways that staff psychologists and rabbis cannot. Some stories will swiftly reveal background; others will provide one perspective on backstory, only to reveal its deceptions. Narratives will be in third person or first person: whichever best conveys dispositions and desires. As the central characters live out their final years, some cognitively impaired, one may conjecture if what we are told is the truth, a variation of truth, a happy white lie, a flagrant lie, or a story that can never reveal its truths.

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