Name

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Analyzing Structure and Meaning in Kipling’s “If”

Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If” is a letter of sorts to his son and an ode to stoicism and manhood. Kipling celebrates such ideal qualities as caution, self-reliance, empathy, patience, and many others by setting up a series of paradoxical comparisons in a very carefully structured form. In doing so, he reveals how more often than not, it is the middle road that will serve as the key to life’s successes—not just for men, but for anyone who embraces these characteristics.

The very structure of the poem serves to communicate Kipling’s idea that “If you can wait, and not be tired by waiting…” (Pechman l.5) “Yours is the Earth, and everything that’s in it / And—which is more!—You’ll be a man, My Son!” (Pechman ll.31-32). He begins 13 of 32 lines with the “If—” construction, which sets the reader up for at “then—” continuation. He does not complete, or continue that “if” construction until lines 31 and 32 of the poem—the final two lines. The message is that the reader, just like his son, must exhibit patience, rather than the extremes of impulsivity or boredom, in order to be rewarded, even in something as simple as a message in a poem (ILUEnglish.com).

Additionally, the poem is composed in what is mainly iambic pentameter. There are a few jarring exceptions to this, but the exceptions actually enhance Kipling’s meaning. First, every other line in “If” is in iambic pentameter, while the remaining lines, which have exactly one extra syllable, are extrametrical. Each stanza of eight lines (other than the first—another exception) contains two groups of rhyme schemes, ABABCDCD. Together, the meter and rhyme scheme comprise a tidy pattern that echoes Kipling’s message: If X, then Y (ILUEnglish.com).

The first stanza’s rhyme scheme is quite different, however, with an AAAABCBC construction. It stands out strikingly against the backdrop of the order and pattern of the other stanzas. Part of the poem’s theme, though, harkens to the uncertainties of life, and how well men deal with them. “If you can make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss, / And lose, and start again…” (Pechman ll. 17-19). Just as Kipling talks of uncertainties, and coping with them, he expects his reader to cope with the uncertainties of poem construction, as well (ILUEnglish.com).

Finally, Kipling uses a series of paradoxes to illustrate that the best route to achieving manhood is the middle road. It is “meet[ing] with Triumph and Disaster” and emerging from both situations gracefully (Pechman l. 11). It’s not looking “too good,” or speaking “too wise[ly]” (Pechman l. 8). It’s knowing loss, but not complaining about it, and “walk[ing] with Kings—[but not] los[ing] the common touch” (Pechman l. 26). Almost as important as what he says is what he leaves unsaid (ILUEnglish.com). Manhood is not about fame, fortune, or musculature, for example. It is defined in much finer, sensitive ways.

Kipling’s “If” is not a difficult poem to understand. It is one that, if the reader has patience to work through one statement to the next, makes its meaning apparent in the final lines with the statement “You’ll be a Man, My Son!” (Pechman l. 32). One might argue that the ideals of manhood which Kipling espouses are not limited solely to men, but are the purview of men and women alike, when they have gained the characteristics of patience, wisdom, self-reliance, and discipline.

Works Cited

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