KIPLING'S POETRY

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Poetry or Verse

Remembered principally as the "great singer of Empire" (Burgess 1974: 208), Rudyard Kipling was indeed, during his long life, a prolific writer of poetry — that is, if we accept that Kipling, for all his acknowledged literary talents, really wrote poetry at all (a doubt voiced by numerous critics). This, of course, would imply that poetry can be objectively defined and that there exist conventional criteria which must be followed in order to produce 'true' poetry. What, then, makes a poem a poem?

Dictionary definitions vary from "a composition of high beauty of thought or language and artistic form, typically, but not necessarily, in verse", to a "rhythmic pattern of words, often with rhyme, forming a literary whole and having an aesthetic or emotional effect" (Chambers 1983; Garmonsway 1965). In other words, poetry is fundamentally a complex interaction of sound and sense. In addition, however, there is a highly subjective element involved in the appreciation of poetry, leading to personal preferences for one particular poem or poet. Current taste and fashion (and even the political climate) also influence the degree of popularity that poets tend to enjoy in certain periods of history and this is surely the case with Kipling.

If nothing else it is recognised that Kipling was a great literary technician and his undoubted skill lay in his mastery of rhyming and versification, the hallmarks of all his poetry. Ironically, it was these very qualities which contributed to the dismissal of many of his poems, by the majority of critics at least, as simply doggerel, worthless verse, and sadly lacking in any of that 'high beauty of thought or language' considered suitable to the poetic form.

T. S. Eliot, however, in his introduction to A Choice of Kipling's Verse (Eliot 1941), comes to the defence (although not without sometimes showing a certain perplexity himself) by making the distinction between 'verse' and 'poetry', applying the former term to Kipling's poems whilst also maintaining that there is 'poetry' in the 'verse'. This essay by Eliot has been considered an important contribution to the reappraisal of Kipling's poetic works, which over the years have suffered much from both denigration and neglect.

Kipling was certainly held in low esteem by many of the literary elite and intellectuals of his time — and he duly returned the contempt! In fact, Kipling never claimed to be a poet at all. His appeal was to the emotions of the great British public, who warmed to his common touch and 'easy listening' type of verses and ballads. He never wrote anything intentionally obscure and, as T. S. Eliot puts it, he even had to answer the charge of 'excessive lucidity'. This is
perhaps best illustrated by the fact that when he was not being heavily rhetorical, as in “Recessional” (one of his best known poems) Kipling deliberately chose colloquial, often vulgar language to make his point, thus provoking the disdain of the above-mentioned critics.

Even the Encyclopaedia Britannica feels obliged to state that “as a poet Kipling will scarcely rank high”. This is a view shared by many modern critics, among them Anthony Burgess, who refers to the “precarious” nature of Kipling’s reputation among the ‘intellectuals’. He does acknowledge, however, both Eliot’s ‘rehabilitating’ essay and also the validity of George Orwell’s view of Kipling that “he is not a great poet, but he sums up for all time a certain phase in English history” (Burgess 1974: 208). The period of Empire was of course one of the greatest influences on Kipling’s early poems and gave him scope both to enlarge his views on the subject and to write about the British ‘fighting man’. An earlier critic, writing at the beginning of the century, put it succinctly when he declared that Kipling was “a poet not of contemplation but of action” (Dowden 1971: 264).

Barrack-Room Ballads

This is clearly reflected in both Kipling’s style and his choice of subject-matter. If we look at his Barrack-Room Ballads (Carrington 1973)\(^1\), it is immediately obvious where Kipling’s admiration and sympathies lay. These ballads (the first of which were originally published in the Scots Observer in 1890) are, as the title of the collection suggests, dedicated to the British army, both as a collective unit and as individuals. The armed forces embodied for Kipling the ideals of loyalty, obedience, bravery on the battlefield and ‘oneness of spirit’ and he shows no small regard either for the soldiers themselves, their ‘rough and readiness’, their misdoings and hardships and, in spite of it all, their sense of humour. If there is a hero, therefore, it is usually an ordinary soldier, commonly referred to at that time as Tommy (a nickname based on that of the real-life army private, Thomas Atkins).

“Tommy” [2] is in fact the title of one of Kipling’s most famous ballads of this period. Through the first person narrative the poet takes the part of the much-maligned soldier, doing his duty for his country and yet not given any thanks, or even respect, until war-time rooms large. The tone is ironic throughout and, more significantly from a stylistic point of view, Tommy’s monologue is in Cockney, the typical east London ‘dialect’, which Kipling used to effect in many of these particular poems.

The main distinguishing features of Cockney speech as represented by Kipling (who was not himself a Cockney) are the dropped ‘h’ at the beginning of words; the missing final ‘g’ from present participles and gerunds; double

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\(^1\) All quotations are taken from this edition, which will subsequently be indicated by square brackets [ ] around the number of the ballad as it appears in the text.
negatives; certain broader vowel sounds; some irregular verbal forms and the substitution of euphemisms for taboo words — most commonly, ‘bloomin’’ for ‘bloody’ and ‘beggar’ instead of ‘bugger’. However, Kipling (through his narrators) is not always consistent in his use of these particular speech patterns, partly for reasons of scansion and partly, one supposes, because of the necessity for a sort of compromise language, recognisably of Cockney derivation and yet easily understood by all: “a kind of bastard cockney” that the critic David Daiches admits can be irritating (Daiches 1969: 1093; vol. IV).

This was in fact the first time that Cockney had appeared in the poetry of a major writer and, although it is now recognised as an important innovation, it was considered by many critics to be an inappropriate vehicle for such an elevated form of literature. Yet a novelist such as Charles Dickens had already put Cockney into the mouths of some of his characters and later, in the 20th century, George Orwell’s ‘proles’ in 1984 were to be distinguished by their use of this particular ‘dialect’.

It is only natural, therefore, that Kipling’s Tommy should tell his story in his own way and in his own vernacular. We feel the bitterness of the soldier’s lot as he faces the hypocrisy of his fellow-countrymen, their high-flown language contrasting with the down-to-earth reaction of Tommy. Stylistically, a crescendo effect is created by the repetition, with variations, of the last four lines of the first stanza culminating with the warning, at the very end of the poem, not to underestimate this Tommy:

For it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Chuck him out, the brute!’
But it’s ‘Saviour of ‘is country’ when the guns begin to shoot;
An’ it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ anything you please;
An’ Tommy ain’t a bloomin’ fool — you bet that Tommy sees!
(ll. 37-40)

Whilst illustrating some of the linguistic features already mentioned, these lines also have a psychological depth and appeal which is not wholly unrelated to the language used. For example, the use of the irregular 3rd person ‘ain’t’ for ‘isn’t’ gives a harder sound to the last line which is counterbalanced by the softer ‘bloomin’’ used as a substitute for ‘bloody’ and thus we see reflected the two sides to Tommy’s nature — the hard-bitten soldier on the one hand, and the human being longing to be appreciated and treated with kindness on the other. It is this perhaps which sums up the message of the poem. In Kipling the ordinary British soldier had finally found his voice and his champion.

Included among The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads are such titles as “The Young British Soldier”, “Route Marchin’”, “Soldier, Soldier”, “Back To The Army Again”, “The Sergeant’s Wedding”, “The Men That Fought At Minden” and many others, all in a similar vein. Therefore it would seem only logical that Kipling, in his attempt to convey what he considered to be a realistic picture of something as tough and unrefined as army life, should use the slang of the common soldier. At times, however, this tends to border on an unnecessarily manneristic and stereotyped approach to his subject-matter (surely not all army
privates at that time were of Cockney origin or even necessarily so rough-talking) and, as we have seen, laid Kipling open to charges of plain vulgarity and even, more recently, of "self-conscious realism" of language (Daiches 1969: 1124; vol. IV).

Naturally there was very little high beauty of language in these ballads to please the literary connoisseurs or critics, but Kipling wasn’t writing for a privileged circle, nor for the critics; he was writing for the people — and the people loved him for it. In other words, as Anthony Burgess rightly remarks (again, in agreement with George Orwell), “he has the gift of stating the obvious — not, as with Pope, for the men of reason and learning, but for the man in the street — with pithy memorableness.” (Burgess 1974: 208) The sources Kipling used were close to the hearts and experiences of the common people — music-hall songs, well-known hymn tunes and popular balladry. In fact many of his ballads were put to music or could be sung to an existing tune. Examples of these are his “Smuggler’s Song”, once popular in English schools, or “Shillin’ A Day” [20], which laments the paltry pension received by soldiers at the time. But this popularity should not lead us to dismiss all his work as simply fodder for the masses, for no lesser poets than W. B. Yeats and, again, Eliot highly commend his ballad of “Danny Deever” [16], much praised for its technical mastery and tense atmosphere.

In spite of the gruesome subject matter — a soldier is to be hanged for murdering a sleeping comrade — it caught the imagination of many people. There is a strange mixture of fear, pathos and compassion in this ballad and also, more importantly, the theme of justice being done according to the Law⁴. This is very significant when discussing Kipling because he believed firmly that the Law, in its abstract perfection, had to be obeyed if order and civilisation were to survive. Here, not only has a crime been committed but a regiment has been disgraced and all the young recruits are being marched out to watch the horrifying hanging scene.

The subject matter is very similar to that of Oscar Wilde’s much longer narrative poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (Wilde 1983), written at about the same time³. But whereas Wilde shows obvious tenderness and pity (based on his own devastating prison experience), Kipling tends to be more distant and detached in his treatment of the subject. Structurally, the question and answer formula used in “Danny Deever” is very effective and heightens the emotional tension. Among the notable forerunners in the use of this poetic technique is John Keats, in his “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (Keats 1988). But whereas in Keats’ ballad the “anguish moist and fever dew” brow of the languid knight is a sign of the tragedy that has already befallen him, in “Danny Deever” we see the “rear-rank breathe so ’ard” in anticipation of something dreadful that is about to happen.

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2 The capital letter is used by Kipling in “Recessional” when he talks of “lesser breeds without the Law” (I. 22).
3 Kipling’s ballad was first published in 1890 and Wilde wrote his ballad in 1897.
The scene is set in both cases by pertinent questions. Compare Keats’ opening lines:

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
(Il. 1-2)

with the urgency of the question asked at the beginning of Kipling’s ballad:

‘What makes you look so white, so white?’ said Files-on-Parade.  
(I. 3)

The rhythm used by Kipling throughout this poem is both persistent and disturbing, bringing us quickly and inexorably to the dramatic conclusion in the final stanza, which begins by taking up the question and answer formula which distinguishes the style of this poem;

‘What’s that think [sic] black agin the sun?’ said Files-on-Parade.  
‘It’s Danny fightin’ ‘ard for life,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.  
‘What’s that that whimpers over’e’ad?’ said Files-on-Parade.  
‘It’s Danny’s soul that’s passin’ now,’ the Colour-Sergeant said.  
(II. 25-28)

The language here is memorable and dramatic in its simplicity, concentrating not so much on a description of the hanging scene itself as on the young recruit’s horror-struck questions as the whole troop is made to watch aghast, and on the matter-of-fact replies of the not unsympathetic figure of authority, the Colour-Sergeant. The naiveté of the first and the experience of the second provide the basis of the dialogue, which paints a clear picture of what is happening without giving any specific physical details. The contrast of the colour ‘black’ against the ‘sun’, undoubtedly red, creates the sinister image of blood and death and the same lack of concrete description is found in the pathos (or bathos) of the whimpering of Danny’s passing soul. Thus the realism of the language is counterbalanced by the poetic use of metonymy.

The last four lines are also well worth noting for their intensity and quick, sharp rhythmic sounds which end the poem almost in one breath:

For they’re done with Danny Deever, you can ‘ear the quickstep play.  
The regiment’s in column, an’ they’re marchin’ us away;  
Ho! the young recruits are shakin’, an’ they’ll want their beer today,  
After hangin’ Danny Deever in the mornin’!  
(II. 29-32)

Kipling’s clever use of repetition, in this ballad and elsewhere, contributes considerably to the poetic effect that he was consciously trying to achieve through the manipulation of sound and rhythm. In “Tommy” it is used to illustrate the constant nagging directed at the long-suffering soldier, and in other
poems it serves as a device to emphasise a certain rhythm or beat, as in “Danny Deever”. Even more obviously the repetition of hard consonants in “Boots” [44] is used onomatopoeically to recreate the sound of the soldiers marching:

We’re foot - slog - slog - slog - sloggin’ over Africa!
Foot - foot - foot - foot - sloggin’ over Africa —
(Boots - boots - boots - boots, movin’ up and down again!)
(ll. 1-3)

Like ‘Foot’ and ‘Boots’ the words ‘Don’t’, ‘Try’ and ‘Count’ are similarly repeated four times at the beginning of their respective stanzas. From the phonetic point of view, the explosive ‘t’ sound contained in these one-syllable words would seem to echo the firing of guns and is therefore appropriate to the military theme. This relentless marching of troops must surely lead to combat sooner or later, with the reminder at the end of every stanza (again repetition) that “there’s no discharge in the war!”.

This poem is hardly very subtle, but it is certainly effective and illustrates Kipling’s ability to manipulate simple, everyday words to produce a required and, in this case, very basic beat. The sound of the words is obsessive and our attention is focused, in every stanza, on those boots that “men go mad with watchin’”. Just listening to the insistent beat of every line is enough to make anyone cry out:

Oh - my - God - keep - me from goin’ lunatic!
(ll. 14)

Whether we like it or not we become involved in the soldiers’ never-ending march and this identification with the subject-matter is an important indication of the success or at least validity of the poem itself.

On the other hand, there are cases where Kipling’s use of repetition as a poetic device results in a rather too jingly, ‘sing-song’ effect, as in “Loot” [15], a much-criticised piece on account of its crude content and language (a robber and rogue is giving ‘advice’, in very vulgar terms, on how to succeed in looting). Lines such as these from the second stanza:

If you’ve knocked a nigger edgewayes when ‘e’s thrustin’ for your life,
You must leave ‘im very careful where ‘e fell;
An’ may thank your stars an’ gaiters if you didn’t feel ‘is knife
That you ain’t told off to bury ‘im as well.
Then the sweatin’ Tommies wonder as they spade the beggars under
Why lootin’ should be entered as a crime;
(ll. 15-20)

and similarly in the third stanza:
An’ if you treat a nigger to a dose o’ cleanin’-rod
‘E’s like to show you everything ‘e owns.
(ll. 25-26)

illustrate why this ballad was not considered worthy by Eliot to be included in
his selection of Kipling’s verse (Eliot 1941). Obviously it was not meant to be
taken too seriously and, if we are to follow Charles Carrington’s advice, should
be considered just “a joke in bad taste” by “a gaudy rogue” with outrageous
morals (Carrington 1973: 160-1). This may have been the case in Kipling’s day,
but the overt racism contained in the language used here is now no longer
acceptable.

Stylistically, the use of stanzas interspersed with a repeated chorus of a very
emphatic nature is an example of how much of Kipling’s verse was eminently
suited to the music-halls, which greatly influenced him. The fact that the entire
poem was meant to be recited aloud or even sung can be seen from the inclusion
of indications in the poem such as (Corney: Toot! Toot!) and the final lines,
which begin with the musical annotation (fff) followed by the rousing ending:

Whoop ‘em forward with a Loo! loo! Lulu!
Loot! loot! loot!
Heeya! Sick ’im, puppy! Loo! loo! Lulu!
Loot! loot! loot!
(ll. 51-52)

By contrast, on a more gentle, even romantic note, there is a once much-
quoted and much-loved ballad called “Mandalay” [19], which tells of the
nostalgia of a returned soldier in London for the warm and sensuous east — in
this case, Burma. Kipling compares not only the climate of the two places, but
also the women. The scene is set in the first stanza, which begins “by the old
Moulmein Pagoda, lookin’ eastward to the sea”, and this exotic opening is soon
followed by the enticing invitation of the siren-like “Burma girl”:

‘Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!’
(ll. 4)

Perhaps there is no better illustration of Kipling’s love for the mysterious
East and the dreams and memories it held than this poem. Here the hard realities
of the Imperialist wars and the system that the British sought to impose on
peoples in foreign lands is forgotten. We hear only the “tinkly temple-bells” and
the wind in the palm-trees, we see the “flyin’-fishes play” and the mist on the
rice-fields, surrounded all the while by “them spicy garlic smells”. There is even
the powerful image of the dawn that “comes up like thunder” and, of course, the
sunshine. All these things serve to highlight the greyness of the wistful
soldier’s life back in London, where he complains:
I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin'-stones,
An' the blasted Henglish drizzle wakes the fever in my bones;
(II. 41-42)4

This theme of nostalgia for far-away lands is taken up again by Kipling in: “Chan’t-Pagan” [55] where the soldier this time is trying to adjust to life back in England after having seen “valleys as big as a shire” in the wide expanses of South Africa (Britain had been fighting the Boers). The first person narrator (a discharged English Irregular) describes the distant land with great emphasis on its immensity, at times in an almost lyrical vein:

An’ the silence, the shine an’ the size
Of the ‘igh inexpressible skies...
(II. 28-29)

The long, repeated vowel sounds here lend the image even more expansiveness and grandeur. This is in sharp contrast with the down-to-earth but nonetheless striking (and even rhetorical) opening lines of the ballad as the soldier-narrator begins to reminisce:

Me that ‘ave been what I’ve been,
Me that ‘ave gone where I’ve gone,
Me that ‘ave seen what I’ve seen -
(II. 1-3)

This use of the disjunctive pronoun (a Gallicism) distinguishes his speech throughout the poem and serves to illustrate once more the originality of Kipling’s poetic style as he attempts to produce varying speech patterns and give a voice to the lower classes.

Curiously there is an ironic similarity, both in theme and expression, between this poem and the much more idyllic “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (Yeats 1950), by Kipling’s contemporary the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. In a moment of homesickness, Yeats says:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.
(II. 9-12)

4 The intrusive ‘h’ at the beginning of the word ‘English’ is a typical example of the confusion over aitch-dropping and the opposite phenomenon of over-correction that Charles Carrington analyses in his introduction to The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling (Carrington 1973: 15-18).
These gentle lines find an echo in the more brutal and disillusioned declaration made by Kipling’s soldier in the last stanza of “Chant-Pagan”, when he makes up his mind to leave for that far-away place where he yearns to be:

I will arise an get ‘ence -
I will trek South and make sure
If it’s only my fancy or not
That the sunshine of England is pale, and the breezes of England are stale,
An’ there’s somethin’ gone small with the lot.
(ll. 60-65)

Both poems suggest dissatisfaction with suffocating city life and the longing to return to the more inspiring, unspoilt places that are still very much alive in the memory.

Paradoxically, the tables are turned in “The Roman Centurion’s Song” (Eliot 1941)5, published in 1924 when Kipling had finally settled in Sussex and was by then turning his attention to wider subject-matter, including the history of England6. In this poem it is instead a Roman soldier of 300 AD who does not want to leave the England he is helping to occupy and, typically, the sentiment is once again that of affection for the conquered land. W. H. Auden has pointed out that Kipling’s vision of history is that of an eternal struggle of civilisation against barbarians (Auden 1973), hence his interest in the Roman Empire as one of the forerunners of the vast British Empire. Unfortunately, the dignity that the poet wanted to bestow on the mighty Romans is not always done justice owing to his use of some rather facile rhyming:

Legate, I come to you in tears — My cohort ordered home!
I’ve served in Britain forty years. What should I do in Rome?
(ll. 29-30)

The banality of the question “What should I do in Rome?” seems rather discordant with the pathos of the centurion’s predicament, which is summed up in the last two lines (again victim of Kipling’s determination to produce a rhyme):

Here is my heart, my soul, my mind — the only life I know.
I cannot leave it all behind. Command me not to go!
(ll. 31-32)

It is also interesting to note the use of exclamation marks in these two quotations (and abundant in much of Kipling’s poetry), demonstrating his love of emphatic or rhetorical statements. The effect, however, is not always

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5 All poems, unless otherwise indicated, are to be found in this collection.
6 Kipling gives a very concise account of England’s history in “Puck’s Song” from “Puck of Pook’s Hill” (1906), and included in (Eliot 1941).
satisfactory and tends to undermine the genuine emotion he wished to convey. Here, the Roman centurion has spent too long in Britain ever to feel ‘at home’ anywhere else.

This kind of sentimental attachment to the foreign colony was especially applicable to many of the British expatriates in India, and to Kipling in particular, whose love of India was the result of a happy childhood spent there with his parents (providing inspiration for his most famous novel *Kim*) and his seven years there as a journalist. It is not surprising therefore that one of his most famous Barrack-Room Ballads should tell the story of “Gunga Din” [13], the faithful and tireless Indian water-carrier who is seen serving the needy British soldiers as they fight under the baking sun. Said to be based on the true story of Juma, water-carrier to a British regiment at the siege of Delhi in 1857, this poem is a fine example of the almost unique poetic style illustrated in this collection of ballads. There is no grand or heroic rhetoric to praise the devoted servant (in fact he is cursed and thanklessly treated by the men of the regiment), but the patient, ragged “bhistie” continues his job, uncomplaining till the very end.

Leaving aside the condescending tone of much of this poem, it has nevertheless some remarkable qualities. The authentic flavour of India is achieved through the measured use of Hindustani words (needless to say, familiar to Kipling) to enrich the scene, and the end result is a vivid and lively picture of the soldiers’ lot, out “in Injia’s sunny clime...a-servin’ of ‘Er Majeey the Queen...where the ‘eat would make your bloomin’ eyebrows crawl!”. As is usual in these ballads nothing is romanticised and when the soldier-narrator is wounded in battle we see him “chokin’ mad with thirst”. But instead of a genteel, Florence Nightingale-type figure, to the rescue comes running “good old grinnin’, gruntin’ Gunga din” with “arf-a-pint o’ water-green”, and what’s more:

It was crawlin’ and it stunk,
But of all the drinks I’ve drunk,
I’m gratefulest to one from Gunga Din.
(ll. 61-63)

The unequivocal insults which are so freely thrown at the water-carrier, “you limpin’ lump o’ brick-dust” and again, “you squidgy-nosed old idol”, have to be considered part and parcel of the soldiers’ everyday language. Even the obvious admiration and appreciation expressed by the soldier-narrator contains no niceties:

An’ for all ‘is dirty ‘ide
‘E was white, clear white, inside
When ‘e went to tend the wounded under fire!
(ll. 44-46)

Yet nowadays, in an age of ‘political correctness’, the idea of the Indian as “nigger”, “eathen” or “part of them black-faced crew” (as Gunga Din is
variously described) would certainly be considered insulting and degrading. At best the praise, which coming from a man of Kipling's background and time was genuine enough, is tainted with the myth of the white man's superiority and is clearly patronising.

It is therefore taken for granted that the non-Christian Gunga, in spite of all his innate goodness, has gone to hell after being hit by a bullet in battle. Yet the soldier's final tribute to the faithful water-carrier is clearly heartfelt and even contains an effective and original image that is touching in its own way:

So I'll meet 'im later on
At the place where 'e is gone —
Where it's always double drill and no canteen;
'E'll be squattin' on the coals
Givin' drink to poor damned souls,
An' I'll get a swig in hell from Gunga din!
(ll. 75-80)

The grim humour is characteristic of Kipling's 'Tommies', who are not blind to the irony of their fate. Here we see that both 'master' and 'servant' are destined for hell and the true spirit of the poem is surely summed up in the very last lines:

Though I've belted you and flayed you,
By the livin' Gawd that made you,
You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!
(ll. 83-85)

Similarly, the bravery of the Sudanese tribesmen in combat against the British is recognised and commended in the poem that Kipling dedicates to them, called "Fuzzy-Wuzzy" [14]. The title speaks for itself and once more we have the same mixture of condescension towards the black man and admiration for his good qualities. It is rather difficult to reconcile the praise and denigration contained in just this one line:

You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;
(ll. 10)

Not only is the African considered ignorant and in need of religious conversion (in keeping with the ideas of the time, of course), but further on he is referred to, with effortless alliteration, as a "big black boundin' beggar". As in the previous poem (and others) the 'colourful' language that Kipling attributes to his soldiers would certainly be offensive in the racially mixed Britain of today — something that Kipling could never have foreseen. This fact, among other things, also helps to explain why Kipling so quickly went out of fashion in the
20th century, meeting with reappraisal only at odd intervals and perhaps only now being again appreciated to a certain extent as a poet.\textsuperscript{7}

Yet, in spite of the undoubted lack of appeal that this particular poem has for the modern reader (it is not considered one of his best by any means), it does show that in the interests of honesty and fair-play Kipling, in his own inimitable way, was trying to put the record straight as regards the Expeditionary Force’s military success in the Sudan. He even attempts to deflate the national pride with lines such as these:

\begin{quote}
We ‘eld our bloomin’ own, the papers say,
But man for man the Fuzzy knocked us ‘oller.
(I. 19-20)
\end{quote}

and later on in the same stanza the tribesman scores a great point of honour in the poet’s eyes, for:

\begin{quote}
We sloshed you with Martinis, an’ it wasn’t ‘ardly fair;
But for all the odds agin’ you, Fuzzy-Wuz, you broke the square.
(I. 23-24)
\end{quote}

As can be seen from these extracts, the schoolboy notion of ‘playing the game’ fairly was keenly felt by Kipling in his treatment of military matters.

In this period generally, and more or less up until the tragic events of the First World War, the bravery of the soldier in battle was often glorified and held up as a shining example. Therefore it is not surprising that Kipling, with his particular background and world-view and his strong attachment to the notion of duty, should touch on this theme in more than one respect. His tribute to the exceptional determination of the fearless Sudanese tribesman is just one example where, in the absence of medals and rewards, “we must certify the skill ‘e’s shown / in usin’ of ‘is long two-‘anded swords”.

It was in keeping with this conviction that in 1890, some thirty-six years after the military disaster known as the Charge of the Light Brigade duly immortalised by the poet-laureate Lord Tennyson, that Kipling took up the cause of the surviving soldiers, no longer in the public eye and left to beg for their living. He made a sharp attack on the way these ‘ex-heroes’ were being treated in civilian life in “The Last of the Light Brigade” (Howe 1983), rebuki ng the “thirty million English who talked of England’s might” when there were “twenty broken troopers who lacked a bed for the night”. There is heavy irony throughout this appeal for the forgotten heroes:

\begin{quote}
They went without bands or colours, a regiment ten-file strong,
To look for the Master-singer who had crowned them all in his song;
(I. 13-14)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} Renewal of interest in Kipling’s poetry is aptly illustrated by the following recently published collections in Britain: Rutherford (1986), Kaye (1990); and in Italy (with translations into Italian): De Zordo (1987).
and more than just a hint of impatience at the inadequacy of high-flown verses:

They felt that life was fleeting; they knew not that art was long,
That though they were dying of famine, they lived in deathless song.
(ll. 5-6)

The paradox contained in these two lines is cleverly balanced and given poetic effect with the alliteration of the letters ‘f’ and ‘l’. The physical act of “dying” is compared to living through art “in deathless song”, which, as a notion, was not new to poets of course 8, but it does illustrate that in spite of the criticism that Kipling lacked poetic sensitivity he could rise to the occasion when necessary. This little known poem is also another example of how Kipling was always ready to take up the part of the often hard-done-by, war-weary soldier.

Thus, from the Crimea to the Sudan, from India and Burma to South Africa, Kipling’s interest in the ups and downs of the British fighting man never flagged and, just after the outbreak of the second Anglo-Boer war, he even wrote a poem appealing for money for the soldiers’ dependants, left behind by “The Absent-Minded Beggar” [40]. Printed in the “Daily Mail” in 1899, it amply illustrates the influence and popularity of Kipling at this time. With this poem alone he managed to raise the enormous sum of a quarter of a million pounds, pricking the conscience of the man in the street with his typically direct style and ending every stanza of the poem with the exhortation:

Pass the hat for your credit’s sake, and pay — pay — pay!
(l. 13)

The poem itself was later set to music and sung in the music-halls, an example of how Kipling’s verse both borrowed from and added to the popular culture of his time.

Kipling and Empire

Over all the long period of Imperial enthusiasm and patriotic fervour, in which Kipling actively and wholeheartedly played his part, loomed the imposing figure of the monarch, Queen Victoria. In an early dedication to her, “Ave Imperatrix” (1882), we see Kipling in a rhetorical and wholly patriotic vein, singing the praises of the Empress of India and pledging complete support for her. Yet only eight years later he describes her most irreverently as “The Widow at Windsor” [1], a formidable old lady keeping herself aloof while the loyal British Tommies — "Missis Victorier’s sons" as he calls them — are winning new lands and securing her Empire abroad. The narrator of the poem informs us

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8 Keats, for example, marvels at the eternal nature of art in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. 
that “‘alf o’ creation she owns”, but it is the soldiers’ blood which has been spilt:

We ‘ave bought ‘er the same with the sword an’ the flame,
An’ we’ve salted it down with our bones.
(Il. 18-19)

The tone of this ballad borders on the facetious and certainly contains some sardonic humour, tempered only by that affection for the Queen which Kipling shared with most of her subjects.

In this regard Irving Howe makes an interesting point when trying to account for some of the contradictions in Kipling’s approach to life, reflected naturally in his writings, by observing that “the sidling up to established power is complicated by solidarity with plebeian victims” (Howe 1983: xiii). In the case of Kipling’s poems we have seen how in many of them the narrator is a ‘Tommy’, representative of the ordinary British soldiers, the often ‘unsung heroes’ (until Kipling took up their cause) fighting the country’s battles. Yet it is well known, and also well illustrated in his poetry, that Kipling was a firm believer in respect for authority, discipline and the concepts of duty, law and order. This particular complexity is just one of the many things to be considered when evaluating Kipling’s work.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in celebration of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 Kipling should write a poem to remind the British of the responsibilities they have towards their “far-flung” Empire. “Recessional” is one of his most stirring poems with, as the title suggests, a wonderfully hymn-like quality and even some Biblical echoes. The famous refrain,

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
(Il. 5-6)

is both a fine example of Kipling’s sometimes impassioned poetic style and also a sign of his underlying insecurity and doubts as to the ability of ‘civilised’ man to rule wisely, justly and according to God’s will over the peoples he has conquered. The fear is that the Empire-builder will become “drunk with sight of power” and will “loose wild tongues that have not Thee in awe”.

This message of humility is repeated again two years later in another well-known poem, addressed this time to the United States, which had just gained the Philippine Islands from the Spanish. In “The White Man’s Burden” the emphasis is once more on the duty of the Imperialist power not only to rule and civilise but also to serve the peoples it is dominating, powerfully expressed in these two lines from the opening stanza:

Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ needs;
(Il. 3-4)
and later on in the poem Kipling talks quite plainly of the need to “check the show of pride”. He goes on to suggest even greater selflessness at the end of the second stanza when he entreats the white man,

To seek another’s profit,
And work another’s gain.
(ll. 15-16)

It is obvious that Kipling saw this metaphorical burden as a very heavy one indeed and, in trying to reconcile the aggression perpetrated on other races in the name of a civilising Empire, he here emphasises the debt owed to these peoples by their conquerors and subsequent masters. It was a mission that has had lasting consequences on 20th-century Britain in particular, as she finally tried to shake off “the White Man’s Burden” and accept a new political role in the world and a new relationship with her ex-colonies.

Turning away from the problems of running an empire but typically still in a didactic vein (this time of a more personal nature) it was in 1910 that Kipling wrote a poem that was also to rank among his most famous and often quoted works, simply entitled “If”. In it he propounds the philosophy of self-reliance and the virtues necessary to make a man a ‘real man’, leaving little room in his stoic view of life for human failings. Yet, in spite of the demanding code of behaviour proposed in this poem (or maybe even because of it), the contraposition of ideas, which is in turn harmonised by a balance of rhythm, produces some memorable lines:

If you can dream — and not make dreams your master;
If you can think — and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
(ll. 9-12)

and, again, in the final stanza:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings — nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much.
(ll. 25-28)

The poem then reaches its famous climax in a profusion of hyperbole, so typical of Kipling in his more impassioned moments and proving once more that — love him or hate him — Kipling possessed a remarkable poetic talent and an unusual skill in using words, rhythm and rhyme:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And — which is more — you'll be a Man, my son!
(ll. 29-32)

When World War One broke out in 1914, Kipling's eloquent and patriotic call for every man to do his duty was heard in the poem "For All We Have and Are". Again there is stoicism, talk of "iron sacrifice" but no complaint, just a rally-cry to the whole nation:

For all we have and are,
For all our children's fate,
Stand up and take the war.
(ll. 1-3)

immediately followed in the next line by this blunt warning (which also serves to complete the rhyme pattern in the crudest of fashions):

The Hun is at the gate!
(ll. 4)

More chilling words follow as Kipling ominously and pessimistically proclaims:

There is nothing left today
But steel and fire and stone!
(ll. 7-8)

This regret for the passing away of the old world order, "in wantonness o'erthrown", and the fervour with which Kipling expresses the need to protect "Freedom" and "England" with a concerted effort —

There is but one task for all —
One life for each to give.
(ll. 37-38)

are intermingled in what could be called a piece of poetic propaganda, appealing to each individual conscience. The final stanza is full of grandiloquence as the poet launches into passionate rhetoric, ending on an almost apocalyptic note with the lines:

What stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?
(ll. 39-40)
War Poems

However, the war brought many losses and much grief, and Kipling himself lost his only son at the Battle of Loos in 1915. Consequently his many "Epitaphs of the War", published in 1919, are often very moving in their simplicity, showing both a more controlled style and also the compassionate side of a more mature and disillusioned man. His ability to sum up the tragedy of war in just a few words is seen in "The Beginner":

On the first hour of my first day
In the front trench I fell.
(Children in boxes at a play
Stand up to watch it well.)

and also in the much quoted "The Coward":

I could not look on Death, which being known,
Men led me to him, blindfold and alone.

There are clear biblical echoes in the dedication to the soldiers who died on the battlefields in Picardy, suggestively called "Gethsemane" (1914-18). The first person narrator, so often used by Kipling, adds poignancy to the account of suffering by the men on the battlefront:

The Garden called Gethsemane,
It held a pretty lass,
But all the time she talked to me
I prayed my cup might pass.
The officer sat on the chair,
The men lay on the grass,
And all the time we halted there
I prayed my cup might pass —

It didn't pass — it didn't pass —
It didn't pass from me,
I drank it when we met the gas
Beyond Gethsemane.
(II. 9-20)

The literary contribution made by these epitaphs and poems has in fact been duly recognised and many of them find their place alongside the more famous 'war poems' of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.9

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9 See, for example, Silkin (1979).
Children’s Verse

Another important but less sombre aspect of Kipling’s poetry is the notable contribution he made to children’s literature, including the many poems he wrote to link the short stories contained in his various collections. In contrast to many of his other poems and verse these are usually charming pieces, sometimes amusing and sometimes with a moral to them. One of the most suggestive of these is perhaps “The Way Through The Woods”, from Rewards and Fairies. Here we see that Kipling could turn his hand, and successfully, to more conventional types of poetry. His handling of the intricate rhyming in this last stanza is surely to be admired:

Yet, if you enter the woods
Of a summer evening late,
When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools
Where the otter whistles his mate,
(They fear not men in the woods,
Because they see so few.)
You will hear the beat of a horse’s feet,
And the swish of a skirt in the dew,
Steadily cantering through
The misty solitudes,
As though they perfectly knew
The old lost road through the woods...
But there is no road through the woods.
(ll. 13-25)

Dramatic Monologues and Later Poems

In fact the vast span of Kipling’s poetry and his versatility and skill in using different verse forms is quite astonishing. The seeming ease with which he turned out a poem such as the “Sestina of the Tramp Royal” is a case in point. This is written in an old verse form of six six-lined stanzas, each having the same end words but in a different order, the whole poem finishing with a triplet. Nor did he seem to have any trouble putting together long dramatic monologues such as “The ‘Mary Gloster’” and “McAndrew’s Hymn”, both of which were written in 1894 and stylistically reflect the influence of Robert Browning. In content, however, they are entirely original and illustrate that if Kipling was not a philosopher or of a particularly reflective nature, he was certainly a great observer, an admirer of men of action (as is abundantly clear from his Barrack-Room Ballads) and also of the new technology of his age.

In the first of these two poems we see how strongly Kipling believed in the virtue of being a ‘self-made man’ from the story of Sir Anthony Gloster, who began as a simple merchant-seaman and, through “slavin’ early an’ late”, is now
dying as “not the least of our merchant-princes”. The contrast between the
tenacious, hard-working father, who explains his hard-earned fortune thus:

I didn’t begin with askings. I took my job and I stuck;
I took the chances they wouldn’t, an’ now they’re calling it luck.
(ll. 15-16)

and the “weak…and idle” liar of a son Dickie, with all his “social nonsense”, is
both dramatic and poetically effective. The regrets, disappointment and
frustration of the old man as he addresses his son are bluntly and bitterly
summed up in these few lines:

Harrer an’ Trinity College! I ought to ha’ sent you to sea —
But I stood you an education, an’ what have you done for me?
The things I knew was proper you wouldn’t thank me to give,
And the things I knew was rotten you said was the way to live.
For you muddled with books and pictures, an’ china an’ etchin’s an’
fans,
And your rooms at college was beastly — more like a whore’s than a
man’s;
Till you married that thin-flanked woman, as white and as stale as a
bone,
An’ she gave you your social nonsense; but where’s that kid o’ your
own?
(ll. 71-78)

In this long and lively poetic monologue Kipling portrays the classic
situation of the father who has pinned all his hopes on his spoilt only son,
expecting, on his death, to be able to pass on the family business which he has
so painstakingly built up. It is to be noted that not one word is said in defence
of the undeserving son, yet another illustration of the poet’s attachment to the
ideals of hard work, dedication and sacrifice. There was no time in Kipling’s
view of life for empty theorising or time-wasting and the ‘moral’ of the story is
quite plain:

For my son ‘e was never a credit: ‘e muddled with books and art,
And ‘e lived on Sir Anthony’s money and ‘e broke Sir Anthony’s
heart.
(ll. 157-8)

Thus disdaining “books and art”, Kipling instead showed great interest in
engineering and mechanics. In praise of such he wrote “McAndrew’s Hymn”, the
story of a “dour Scots engineer” with “little time to burn on social repartee” but
completely dedicated to the steamships he helps to run. As in “The ‘Mary
Gloster’” we see Kipling inspired by the sea and its ships; not the romantic
sailing ships of old, but the new, technologically advanced steamers of the late
19th century, with all their nuts and bolts, furnace bars, dynamoes and the
engine room, the very heart of it all, where McAndrew himself works. This was certainly not a traditional subject for poetry at that time, which tended to talk more of love and nature than man-made inventions. In fact, McAndrew is heard to complain:

Romance! Those first-class passengers they like it very well,  
Printed an’ bound in little books; but why don’t poets tell?  
I’m sick of all their quirks an’ turns — the loves an’ doves they dream —  
Lord, send a man like Robbie Burns to sing the Song o’ stea’nt!  
(ll. 148-51)

McAndrew, and by extension Kipling too, looked forward to the day when men would “build the Perfect Ship” — trusting that it was God’s will — and it is in this much praised poem that we learn the lesson of the mechanical workings of the ship:

‘Law, Orrder, Duty an’ Restraint, Obedience, Discipline!’  
(l. 167)

Thus the recurrent themes of much of Kipling’s poetry are here summed up. This is in fact a list of the qualities and virtues that the poet also saw as necessary for the creation of a well-run world. It was an ideal that he combined with the realism of his poetic world, a realism that could at times appear studied or exaggerated, but which nevertheless succeeded in achieving an immediate impact and wide emotional appeal.

Kipling was always sure of his message and of the rightness of that message, even though in his later works — from his World War poems onwards — there is a more pessimistic note, as in “The Storm Come”, written in 1932 but referring to the events of 1914 and their consequences for the world. Human pain and suffering are also subjects of his later poems as he began to be afflicted by bad health and, no doubt, mellowed by old age. In the “Hymn of Breaking Strain” (Kipling 1939) he compares the tragic condition of man to the carefully measured, and therefore bearable pressure put on material constructions, and poems such as “Gertrude’s Prayer” and the “Hymn to Physical Pain” (Kipling 1932) also reveal the poet’s obsession, in his twilight years, with illness and dying.

Kipling’s long life was divided almost equally between two different centuries and his vast output of poems shows considerable diversity, both in style and subject-matter. It is fair to say that although his poetry as a whole did not always conform to the traditional norms (as laid down by the critics, more often than not not) he was, in his day, extremely popular with the working man and woman, the soldier and engineer — in other words, the ‘heroes’ of many of

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10 See also “The Ballad of the Cars” and “The Dying Chauffeur” in Rudyard Kipling’s *Verse, 1885-1932* (Inclusive Edition), Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1933.
his poems, ballads and verses. While he showed no interest in the title of poet-laureate\textsuperscript{11}, or even simply that of poet, surely the definition provided by William Wordsworth in his preface to the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} applies in every respect to Kipling. “What is a Poet?” asks Wordsworth and answering this very pertinent question he declares, “He is a man speaking to men… He binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society.”\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps this was Kipling’s greatest achievement.

Bibliography


\textsuperscript{11} According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica he is said to have intimated, in 1895, that he would decline the poet laureateship should it be offered to him.

