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# *IF* by Rudyard Kipling

**About the Poet:**[Rudyard Kipling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling) – an English littérateur, well known for his works such as The Jungle Book, Kim, and the iconic poem If, was an eminent poet, a novelist and a prolific writer of short stories. He was born on Indian soil on the 30th of December, 1865 in the city of Bombay, then under the British rule. Leaving his lavish colonial life in India at the age of five to move to England for the sake of his education was the earliest misfortune which Kipling encountered. His foster parents treated him very roughly while he was trying to adjust in his new school. However, things got better when he moved to a boarding school in Devon where his literary career began budding as he assumed the responsibilities of the editor of the school newspaper.

Upon returning to India in 1882, Kipling began to work for the newspaper industry and also started his literary career officially, the fruit of which were Department Ditties and other Verses and Plain Tales from the Hills, his first collections of verses and stories respectively. Towards the early 90s, his reputation as a poet was cemented and his works began to be published in the National Observer which were later compiled in the Barrack-Room Ballads. At this time he was fast becoming one of the most revered poets of the British Empire and the soldiers at war were one of his most preferred subjects. His Barrack-Room Ballads and Soldiers Three contain some of his best works on soldiers.

Kipling married Caroline Balestier in 1892 and the couple moved to Vermont in the States, during which time he wrote his Jungle Book and Kim. His Jungle Book went on to make Kipling a name to be reckoned with in the world of children’s literature and Kim, till now remains one of Kipling’s most famous works. He returned to England again in 1896 and published his Captain Courageous. Kipling also visited South Africa extensively and it was during his visit in time of the Boer War that he penned the Just-So Stories.

Kipling finally settled in Sussex with his family in 1992 where he spent the rest of his life devoted to the pen. This man of letters left us on the 18th January, 1936. The poet’s other important works include The Seven Seas, The Day’s Work, Trafficks and Discoveries, Debits and Credits, Thy Servant a Dog – for a few to name. Kipling received many honorary degrees and awards in his lifetime such as the Gold Medal of the Royal Society of Literature in 1926 and he turned down many honors as well such as a knighthood and the Poet Laureateship. His contribution to Literature received the most recognition when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907.

**About the Poem IF:**The poem If was published in 1910 in Kipling’s collection of short stories and verses named ‘Rewards and Fairies’. This poem which is a dictum for meaningful living had for its inspiration the ‘Jameson Raid’ of 1895 which was a military action taken during the Boer War in South Africa. This raid, led by Leander Starr Jameson, had resulted in a great rush of patriotism in England in spite of being a failure. This was because the English public saw this military action of Jameson and his willingness of take responsibility for its fall, an act of exemplary courage. Kipling was also greatly moved by the patriotic sentiments which the Jameson Raid had ushered all across the island and took inspiration from the same to pen If. In spite of being published in 1910, the poem still remains a staple of inspirational Western Literature as it is a magnificent tribute to the most noble virtues of being human. This poem has been so ingrained in the psyche of the British people that a couplet from it has been engraved above the entrance to Wimbledon’s Centre Court which goes on to reflect the poem’s timeless appeal and the ability of inspire. This poem has motivated a number of great minds. Wayne Dyer while opining on the poem says, “The lofty ideas in his four-stanza poem inspire me to be a better man each time I read it and share it with my children, students, and audiences.”

### Setting of the Poem IF

**Setting:**The poem If does not have a conspicuous physical setting. However, after reading the poem one can visualize a setting in which a father is speaking to his son and giving him the most valuable life lesson on how to become a complete man. The token of personal philosophy and wisdom which the father imparts to his son has universal validity. Hence the seemingly domestic setting in which the moral philosophies of the poem are shared assume a much larger universal space.

### Mood of the Poem IF

**Mood:**Since the poem If encapsulates within its thirty lines a blueprint for personal integrity, rightful behavior and self-development; the mood of the poem is both didactic and serious. However, the didactic fiber of the poem is not dry and preachy but highly motivational. The urgency and sublimity with which Kipling pens down his moral axioms for becoming a virtuous human being infuses the general mood of the poem with a burst of inspiration. Suggested reading:-

The poem *If* can be viewed as a set of guidelines on how to live and act with integrity and right values such that one becomes the ideal human. Each of the four stanzas deals with different life situations and the best way to act during them. The poem *If* does not have a conspicuous physical setting. However, after reading the poem one can visualize a scene in which a father is speaking to his son and giving him the most valuable life lesson on how to become a complete man. The token of personal philosophy and wisdom which the father imparts to his son has universal validity. Read below and refer to additional links for If summary-

[Setting and Mood of the Poem IF by Rudyard Kipling](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/04/setting-poem-rudyard-kipling/)

**IF Summary and Analysis by Rudyard Kipling**

*Keep your head*: Keep a calm and composed state of mind

*Losing theirs:* Theirs here refers to heads. Losing one’s head means losing one’s calm and composure.

*Make allowance*: accommodate, consider

*Don’t give way to hating*: Not allowing oneself to feel hatred

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:*

Through the first stanza of *If*, the poet Rudyard Kipling offers us his opinion on how to operate during times of crisis. The poet urges readers that when the going gets difficult and things stop to work in our favor we must not lose our composure and deal with the situation at hand in a calm fashion in order to salvage it. It is human nature to save oneself the blame for failures and put it on others. The poet asks us to combat this basic human frailty and harbor within ourselves the courage to take responsibilities for our actions that have produced the undesired results just like Jameson did during the raid. During times of crisis, it is expected that people are going to lose their rationality and indulge in blame games. The poet urges us to not give to the same.

The poet asks us to garner enough confidence to believe in oneself and our potential even if the others around us have given up on us. Hence, we see that self-faith is a virtue which Kipling puts forward with high regard. However, the poet warns us against getting over-confident. He says we must have confidence but not blind faith in ourselves as the latter will stop us from giving ears to the valuable suggestions and recommendations of others. In other words, we must make enough room in our heads for opposing ideas from others if they seem legit.

Patience is another virtue which the poet advocates in favor of. The poet says that all monumental things take time and hence we must not get tired of waiting for our plans to achieve full fruition as Rome can never be built in a day.
The poet then points out another human weakness of lying and easily giving in to hatred if something does not appeal to our way of thinking. He says that we must not deal with lies even if the people around us are spreading wrong accounts of as doing so would stop us down to the level of those gossipmongers. Neither should we allow ourselves to feel hatred for others, even if there are people hating us for whatever reasons. Hence, it is clear that through the lines six and seven, the poet is asking us to keep an open mind, untouched by lies and hatred.
Kipling is aware that instilling these virtues in his readers might make them exceedingly self-congratulatory and hence in the last line of the stanza, he asks us to shun any inclination towards abnormal self-regard.

***Poetic Devices:****If you can keep your head:*This is an instance of **synecdoche**. In synecdoche, one thing is replaced by another intimately associated with it. Here the abstractions, calm of mind and composure have been replaced by the closely related head which is concrete.

*When all men*…: Here ‘men’ again is an instance of **synecdoche**. It is the kind of synecdoche where a part is used for the whole. ‘Men’ here actually denotes all of humanity.

[Line by Line Summary of IF – Stanza 2](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/05/summary-analysis-rudyard-kipling-stanza-2/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

[Setting and Mood of the Poem IF by Rudyard Kipling](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/04/setting-poem-rudyard-kipling/)

[Line by Line Summary of IF – Stanza 1](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/05/summary-analysis-rudyard-kipling-stanza-1/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**IF Summary and Analysis by Rudyard Kipling**

*Make dreams your master*: Allow your dreams, i.e. your wants and desires from life to take control over you

*Make thoughts your aim:* Becoming so rigid about one’s opinions and thoughts that you cannot take suggestions

*Impostors:* A person who pretends to be someone else in order to deceive others

*Knaves*: Dishonest men

*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;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools:*

In the second stanza, *If* engulfs within its scope, the correct way to pursue one’s goals in life. Through the first two lines the poet very succinctly explains to us the difference between being ambitious and a megalomaniac. He says that it is all right to have ambitions and dreams in life. However, we must not get over ambitious, i.e., we must not let our dreams and desires take the better of us, such that they end up controlling our every waking moment and change who we are. It is known that ambition can drive men crazy and hence Kipling asks us to practice moderation when it comes to being ambitious. A lot of us suffer from the problem of assuming that our outlook and way of thinking are the ‘be all and the end all’.

This syndrome is referred to as *‘making thoughts our aim’* by Kipling. He says that we must not be very rigid in the way we think and must be open to good influences upon our thinking process. According to the poet these values are important in getting us closer to our goals in life.
Next the poem imparts a very valuable lesson. He says that Success and Failure are a part and parcel of life and there is nothing permanent about them. The poet calls them impostors since both success and failure are powerful and have a disguise of permanence which makes a person feel either too optimistic or broken down. The poet recommends his readers to treat both success and failure in the same way and not let them get to us since both of them are as fickle as the wheel of Fortune.

Next, Kipling tells us that the road to attaining one’s goals is never an easy one and is filled with hurdles to be encountered with such as people who might try to break our moral by misconstruing our righteousness and virtue in a way that can be used against us. The poet asks us to not let the mind games of such people hinder us.
On our path to success we might have to encounter failures which might wipe away everything that we have achieved. The poet’s word of advice for such a misfortune is to never give up. He asks us to develop within ourselves such a potent power of creation that upon facing even the most brutal failures we can start from scratch again.

**Poetic Devices:***Not make dreams your master:* This is an instance of **personification**. In this particular poetic device nature or any inanimate object or abstraction is invested with human attributes. Here, dream is given the human attribute of being someone’s master.

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster/ And treat those two impostors just the same:*This again is an instance of **personification**. Abstractions such as Triumph and Disaster have been given human attributes by being referred to as impostors.

*Hear the truth you’ve spoken twisted by knaves:*This is an instance of **extended metaphor** in which an implied far-fetched comparison is made between two dissimilar things. Here, comparison is being made between truth and a flexible object that can be twisted.

*Worn-out tools:*Worn out tools here is a **metaphor** for human potential for creation which has become weak and exhausted after facing a massive failure on the path of creating something meaningful. *Or watch the things you gave your life to:*This is a slight instance of **hyperbole**. When the poet is saying things that a per

[Line by Line Summary of IF – Stanza 3](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/05/summary-analysis-rudyard-kipling-stanza-3/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

### ****IF Summary and Analysis by Rudyard Kipling****

Pitch and toss: A game based on luck in which you have equal chances of winning or losing

Sinew: That tissue of the body which unites the muscle and the bone

Serve your own: Work for you or in your favor

If you can make one heap of all your winnings And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,And lose, and start again at your beginningsAnd never breathe a word about your loss;If you can force your heart and nerve and sinewTo serve your turn long after they are gone,And so hold on when there is nothing in youExcept the Will which says to them: “Hold on!”

In the third stanza, Kipling furnishes his readers with the very important life advice of never giving up! Life is unpredictable and filled with ups and downs. Trying to make one’s mark in the world is nothing short of a gamble. The poet asks us not to be shy away from challenges just because we are scared that we might lose what we already have. He says that the ideal man is the one who can put all of his life’s achievements at risk, while aiming towards bigger goals. It takes immense strength of mind to shake off a loss in order to keep going but a complete man is the one who does not cry over spilt milk and starts afresh from scratch even after being completely snubbed and broken.
Towards the end of the stanza, Kipling adds that will power is the only key to persistence in spite of loss. If a man is determined, he can make his heart, nerve and sinew serve him even in the most down trodden and bleakest of times when everything seems to be going against his favor.

**Poetic Devices:**  If you can make one heap of all your winnings/And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss: The first line is an instance of the poetic device of **vision** in which an imaginary picture is penned by the poet. Here, we see the image of a man stacking all his life’s achievements in a heap. In the second line, the act of trying to become successful in life has been compared to a gambling game. These two lines are together an instance of the poetic device of **periphrasis** in which a simple statement is expressed in a round-about way for beauty’s sake. Through these elaborate lines, the poet is simply trying to say that one can only get successful by taking risks.

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew/To serve your turn long after they are gone: Heart, nerve and sinew are **metaphors** for human potential and caliber. They have also been **personified** by being given the human attributes of serving someone.

Except the Will which says to them: “Hold on: Will has been **personified** here as it has been shown by the poet as performing the human action of saying.

[Line by Line Summary of IF – Stanza 4](https://beamingnotes.com/2015/12/05/summary-analysis-rudyard-kipling-stanza-4/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

Keep your virtue: Keep your good qualities intact

Common touch: Common touch here implies modesty and a down to earth attitude

Men count with you: Men give you respect and regard

Unforgiving minute: If you waste time, it never forgives you.

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;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!

The final stanza the poet discusses the ideal modus operandi in life after success has been attained. Since these are the poet’s final instructions to his readers, the lines are resplendent with poignancy and are worded in a way which infuses our minds with a rush of inspiration. Kipling says that a great man is someone who fit into all sections of the society seamlessly. He urges his readers to move around with the common masses without letting go of their individuality. Humans tend to go with the flow because of the herd mentality. However, the perfect man is the one who will not follow any rat race or trends blindly and will stand out in spite of being a part of the crowd. Next, the poet warns us about the arrogance that often comes with great success.

He asks us to be wary of the heart numbing effects of success and motivates us to not let go of our compassion or become too proud upon being accepted into the finest rung of the social ladder. What Kipling wants to tell us here is that success is only palatable and meaningful if it is in a nexus with modesty.

The poet further adds that true success can only be attained if one reaches such a point in life that neither friends nor foes can cause hurt in a way that reduces one’s productivity. A perfect human being is someone who is dependanble. However, one must be careful to not make people so dependent upon oneself that they lose their potential to work on their own.

The poet ends the poem with the parting advice that one must become the master of one’s own Time by squeezing maximum productivity out of the smallest unit of Time. He urges his readers to fill an unforgiving minute with “sixty seconds’ worth of distance run”. What Kipling is trying to say here is that Time does not know how to forgive the ones who waste it. Even the smallest unit of Time has no mercy for the ones who do not know how to utilize it. Hence, to get ahead in life, a man must make most of each of the sixty seconds in a minute by filling it with a burst of activity since ever moment counts! Towards the very end of the poem, Kipling assumes a fatherly stance and sincerely says – if one keeps in mind all the axioms of meaningful living imparted by him, the world will be his playground and he will be able to conquer all! However, according to the poet, the real reward of abiding by his guidelines will lie in the perfect man which this choice of lifestyle will turn an individual into.

**Poetic Devices:**Or walk with kings: Here Kings is an instance of **synecdoche**. The term Kings has been used here to represent people from higher classes.

Unforgiving Minute: This is an instance of **personification**. The abstraction minute has been invested with the human attribute of being merciless.

Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it: This is an instance of **hyperbole** in which an idea is poetically magnified for the sake of beauty and emphasis. By this sentence what Kipling actually means to say is that a man can achieve his goals his life if he subscribes to the dictums forwarded by him in the poem.

Apart from the poetic devices discussed, there is also the device of **antithesis**that has been used in abundance in the poem. In antithesis contrasted words or ideas are put together for the sake of emphasis. Lines such as If you can dream – and not make dreams your master, If all men count with you, but none too much are a few more are good examples of antithesis.

The poem If can be viewed as a set of guidelines on how to live and act with integrity and right values such that one becomes the ideal human. Each of the four stanzas deals with different life situations and the best way to act during them. The poem If does not have a conspicuous physical setting. However, after reading the poem one can visualize a scene in which a father is speaking to his son and giving him the most valuable life lesson on how to become a complete man. The token of personal philosophy and wisdom which the father imparts to his son has universal validity.

**Form and Structure:**The structure of the poem If is taut, neat and symmetrical. It has been divided into four identical stanzas of eight lines each. Hence, the poem has thirty two lines in total.

The meter of the stanzas is **iambic pentameter**, which means each line can be divided into five feet with one unstressed and stressed syllable each in that order. This gives the form of the poem a sense of cohesion and order which is very much in keeping with the central idea of the poem which advocates an ordered and controlled lifestyle. Iambic Pentameter invests an ambience of control and order to any poem.

Rhyme Scheme: The 1st stanza of the poem follows the rhyming pattern of **AAAABCBC** whereas the 2nd , 3rd and 4th stanzas follow the rhyming pattern of **ABABCDCD.**

### Central Idea of IF by Rudyard Kipling:

Life only has meaning when it has been lived meaningfully and our identity as human beings can only be ratified in the real sense of the term if we live virtuously by following a set of high moral codes and conduct. Rudyard Kipling’s If is a blueprint for all those qualities and virtues which we must inculcate within us to be able to call ourselves complete human beings and also in order to attain true success in life. In course of the thirty two lines of the poem, Kipling advocates the virtues of composure, patience, integrity, modesty, control, perseverance, tolerance determination, confidence – for a few to cite. This poem is the like a rule book to perfect the art of living and being human.

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### Theme of the Poem IF:

The over-arching theme of the poem If is successful virtuous living based on values pertaining to integrity, rightful behavior and self-development. The poem speaks to each and every reader on what it means to become a complete man and how he operates through the thick and thins of life. The various values and codes of conduct imparted through the poem form the different sub-themes of the poem, which are as follows:

Rightful Behavior: Most of what this poem advocates deals with rightful behavior such as keeping a calm head and maintaining composure during times of crisis instead of indulging in blame games. The poet also adds that we must not deal with lies or brew hatred in our hearts even if the ones around us are doing the same. Upon achieving success or failure the poet advocates the rightful stance of not letting any of these promotions or set-backs influencing us. Instead we must understand the temporary nature of the ups and downs in life and go about our business in a steadfast, unaffected fashion.

Modesty: Modesty is one theme which shines out in the poem. The poet asks us to never get too self-righteous even if we have the best set of virtues and abide by strict moral codes: And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise. Money often comes in suit with arrogance. The poet urges his readers to practice modesty upon getting successful in life so that he can fit in seamlessly with the kings as well as the common masses.

Balance: Maintaining balance and control in all aspects of life is an important theme which the poem forwards. The poet asks us to give our maximum effort to our goals in life but at the same times asks us to not make our ambition and dreams our be all and end all. He asks us to have faith in our belief system but not so much that we become immune to the valuable opinions of others.

Patience: There is also the theme of patience in the poem. The poet asks us to patiently wait for our efforts to reach fruition because all good things take time to materialize.

Self-belief: Belief in the self is one another sub-theme in the poem. The poet asks us to not lose faith in our beliefs and convictions even if the ones around us begin to lose hope in us.

Risk Taking: The poem often showcases life as a gamble in which all our achievements might get washed away. The poet wants us to be willing to take that risk in life as it will bring us closer to our final goals in life.

Persistence: The ‘never-give-up’ outlook towards life is one major theme of the poem. The poet asks us to keep striving towards our goals, against all odds, even if it involves putting all of our life’s achievements at stake. Shall we lose all we have while trying to get ahead in life, we must not back down but muster enough will power and determination to start again from scratch.

Time Management: The unforgiving nature of Time comes out in the last stanza of the poem. The poet stresses upon the fact that Time when lost never comes back so one must give every second of our waking minutes all we have to make the most of it.

### Conclusion of the Poem IF

If by Rudyard Kipling is one of the most fervent pieces on what it means to lead a life that has been made meaningful through right virtues and values. This poem consists of just thirty two lines but within its purview it encompasses some of the most integral life lessons that can be put to use during the good as well as the bad times which we go through in life. Some of the virtues and qualities forwarded in the poem might seem lofty and even impossible to attain but there is no denying the fact that they are the crux of what humanity can offer best. In short, this poem paints a wonderful and inspiring picture of how an ideal man leads an ideal life! The poem is recommended from reader to reader and passed from generation to generation because of its capacity to move the hearts of the readers and inspire