Perspective, Vision And Influence Of Empowerment In Rudyard Kipling's Poems

Rita Dove a 1990s American poet once described that “Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful” (Dove, 2019) Describing poetry as words creating sounds, images to convey a powerful, influential message.

Today I will discuss how a Victorian-era poet, Rudyard Kipling shows his perspective, vision, and influence of empowerment within his poems, ‘The White Man’s Burden’ and ‘IF’. Both poems individually construct and provided a unique view of what it is like growing up to have a balanced life while dealing with imperialism.

The power of poetry can affect all generations, make people consider anything from love to lose, and most importantly, it can inspire. This is what Rudyard Kipling had achieved perfectly within his poems.

Kipling won the Noble Prize for literature in 1907. While having an unpopular political view caused his work to be neglected shortly after his death in1936. However, his worldwide audience ¬admired and only spoken of him in terms of extravagant praise. (Henry Rider Haggard, n.d.)

According to Author Mary Hamer, Kipling’s 1899 poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’ is considered one of the “most often quoted and most regularly misunderstood poems”. (Hamer, 2008). As the poem reflected the idea of nation-wide power, justifying imperialism and explaining that white American men colonizing another country were morally acceptable. As it wasn’t their intention to rule for their own benefits but for the advancement and modernization of the underdeveloped nation.

The poem's title “The White Man’s Burden” enforces this idea of western colonial power through the metaphorical “Burden” of having to take over from Spanish rule of the Philippine Islands, as it is their duty in the world to colonize and teaching the developing countries how to be civil according to European culture.

Each stanza begins with the repeating phrase 'Take up the White Man's burden' to reiterating Kipling’s main message of “White men” doing what was expected. Infusing pride and the feeling of responsibility in the poem causing us to believe the European imperialistic goals are justified.

The use of imagery within the first stanza sarcastically expresses the kindness and generosity of the “white man” for doing their part in the world. However, after stanza four the mood of the poem shifts from “white men” doing what was responsible for them, to being considered oppressive, as the poem continues to focus more on how the natives reacted. This is shown at the end of stanza five, saying “Our loved Egyptian night”. This symbolized the day when the colonies gain their independence from the white men, but the poem suggests that white men should be sad yet prideful, that it was their “burden” that enabled the colonies to be able to fight.

However, it is interesting to see how Rudyard Kipling can write another poem representing the idea of power in a completely different way. Kipling’s 1909 poem “IF” is considered one of his most inspirational, motivational yet. The poem reflects on having power within yourself as it contains life mottos and ways to live a full life.

During the time in which Kipling wrote the poem, it related strongly to his largely tragic and unhappy life. Kipling was starved of love and attention and sent away to England by his parents as he was born in India. Being beaten and abused by his foster mother and later in his life the death of his two children affected him deeply.

However, through his stories and poems, he grew to fame quickly and was offered many honors in which he rejected. Kipling reflects on his past experience of having very low, lows and very high, highs within his poem as it is a blueprint for personal development. The poem shows the idea of empowerment by having morally correct behaviors while having the endurance of pain or hardship without the display emotion, ultimately showing the power in balancing one's emotions in ensuring not to get caught up in them. This can be seen in the first stanza of the poem focuses on believing in yourself to “keep your head” while others metaphorically lose theirs. This allows the reader to understand that it doesn’t matter how others react to the situations around you, have the power to keep calm and stay true to yourself.

The following stanza personifies the word “dream” by asking us to not allow our dreams to act like our maters and control us, but rather have the power to turn these dreams into realistic goals in the future. The stanza follows on to metaphorically compare “Triumph and Disaster” to “importers”, as success and failure can both deceive, just as happiness and sorrow don’t last long but we are often deceived by them in thinking they are permanent, causing us to forget our duties. Throughout, the rest of the poem it reflects the theme of finding the power within yourself to not focus on one aspect in life and find the balance within life’s hardships and future dreams.

A good poem has the power to shape the universe, help extend everyone’s knowledge of themselves and the world around them. Providing the reader with insight into the inner workings of their minds, ideas loves, and hates. Rudyard Kipling’s 1889 poem “The White Man’s Burden” and 1909 poem “If” express these qualities perfectly. Each poem provided the reflection of the idea of poetry and power, either through a worldwide lens of imperialism, and having the power of an empire, or represented power in a more self-reflecting manner, in explaining the power of having a balanced life.