

Rudyard Kipling's view of the British imperial empire

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Rudyard Kipling is widely understood to be a strong defender of the British Empire. However, Kipling's prose piece, 'The Man Who Would Be King', reveals a deeper ambiguity about the Empire, exposing many of the flaws that lay at the heart of the imperial expansion. In this piece two men, Daniel Dravot and Peachy Carnehan, grow tired of the stagnant and impractical rule of the British colonies in India. They set off on an ill-fated adventure to become kings in their own right. Additionally, Kipling's work 'The White Man's Burden' also deals with the faults in the creation and governance of an imperial empire. However both works do this in very different ways.

'The Man Who Would Be King' is the story of two men, Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, a pair of uneducated adventurers, drunkards, confidence artists and blackmailers, who try to establish themselves as god-kings of Kafiristan. Kafiristan is described as the eastern province of Afghanistan, on the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush Mountains. The two men have no legitimate claim whatsoever to this region but Dravot becomes king by declaring himself a god under the extraordinary coincidence that the masonic symbols on his robe match that of local prophecy and legend. However when he tries to extend his power too far by taking a native girl to be his wife, in direct defiance of the traditions and culture of the native people, the girl bites him and draws blood proving he is in fact not a god. The mini-empire is founded on deceit; and once Dravot is revealed to be "neither God nor Devil, but a man", he is attacked and eventually killed by the native people. Kipling's view here is that a direct invasion of a native-foreign culture for the sole purpose of ruling, subjugating, and exploitation is never a good thing and is doomed to fail. Daniel and Peachy were not trying

to elevate their subjects, nor were they trying to better them or their situation; but merely sought personal wealth and gain as seen in the following quote, “ The country isn’t half worked out because they that governs it won’t let you touch it. They spend all their blessed time in governing it, and you can’t lift a spade, nor chip a rock, nor look for oil, nor anything like that without all the Government saying—‘ Leave it alone and let us govern.’ Therefore, such as it is, we will let it alone, and go away to some other place where a man isn’t crowded and can come to his own... we are going away to be Kings.” This is coming on the tail of a discussion by Daniel and the narrator—a representation of Kipling himself—about how petty work and governance of the British Empire doesn’t allow a man to build wealth.

The two view empire as a means of generating personal wealth, not as an exercise in political, social and cultural development. It could perhaps be argued that it is this quality that makes Peachey and Davrot unfit to rule and leads ultimately to their downfall. Had their intentions been less altruistic, they would not have lied and set themselves up as gods, but as leaders who wished to better the people. Instead they ruled by fear and subjection, as did the British Empire. They set themselves up for downfall when their lie was exposed. In the same way, the real-life British Imperialist tendencies almost always fell apart as the surface altruism fell away under the typical need to subjugate and exploit native peoples.

By contrast, ‘ The White Man’s Burden’ is a call to the “ White Man” at the center of the empire to bring civilization and education to the natives of the

conquered populations of the Empire. [The purposes of empire is so the white man, the civilized British Empire, came to work for the welfare of the peoples of the conquered inductions of the empire, but should expect no thanks for his efforts.]-reword In fact, he can expect to be met with resistance and resentment from the “ silent, sullen peoples” whose situation he works to better. ‘ The White Man’s Burden’ is the act of building an empire as a noble service, bringing the benefits of the enlightened people- namely the British Empire-to the uncivilized masses. It is by that measure that Peachy and Daniel, an allusion for the Imperialist British Empire, fail. Peachy and Daniel seek to build their empire for altruistic reasons and pay the price when their altruism erodes away. The British Empire often viewed the native people and ignorant and stupid, as by some measure less than human. This was paralleled by Peachy and Daniel as they built their empire. But after some time was spent with the natives Peachy and Daniel realized they were, in fact, people with ideas and opinions, saying that, “ They are Englishmen, these people” which incidentally is in of itself a racist statement. This shows how the natives are thought of as subhuman and how the only true measure of humanity is whether or not they are an “ Englishmen.”

In “ The Man Who Would Be King’ and in ‘ The White Man’s Burden’, Kipling deals with the rise and fall of an empire created for altruistic purposes and the burden placed on the creators of the empire, whom Kipling believes must suffer in order to improve the lives of the subjects of the empire. Kipling goes so far as to acknowledge the “ blame” and “ hate” of “ those ye better”. He

references the natives hate for the occupational forces of Britain despite how they are supposedly trying to better them, a phenomenon he must have been well aware of having lived in India most of his life. Together, these texts paint an unsavory picture of an empire built on avarice and pride, sustained by people who traveled far across the world only to fall victim to tropical diseases and who died thousands of miles away from home, and shaken by the anger of the people whose native lands had been taken over by foreigners with no legitimate claim to them. Kipling seems to have, perhaps unintentionally, created a strong case for the end of imperialism, despite his overt endorsement of the continuation of the existing European empires.