

Corrupt colonialism in "the man who would be king"



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The nineteenth century was a period of great colonial expansion for the British Empire. It was during this period of time that Rudyard Kipling wrote his famous novella "The Man Who Would Be King." It tells the story of two British explorers in India who decide to travel to Kafiristan, a remote part of Afghanistan, and become kings. Although many approved of the expansion of the empire and the colonizing of many natives in the Eastern parts of the world, people did not always agree with the methods and motivations behind the actions of explorers and colonizers. This story is a clear criticism from Kipling on the ills of the British colonialism occurring in India during this time, specifically the immorality of the motivations and methods of the imperialization, as well as a commentary on the problems created by the individual moral character of the men who would be kings.

Kipling, as a consequence of the time in which he lived, held many of the same beliefs as most of the Westerners that they were superior to those of the other countries and territories that they had visited and imperialized. However, in "The Man Who Would Be King" we can see that he did not always agree with their methods nor the consequences of these actions. Carnehan and Dravot, the main characters of this short story, are two adventurers who decide to travel to a remote part of Afghanistan. This location has so far remained untouched by the British Empire and they hope to use this to their advantage. They convince the local peoples that they are gods and live among them for a time content with the kingdom they have acquired. However, their greed and lust get the best of them and their mortality is revealed. As a consequence, Dravot was killed and Carnehan was

crucified but survived and then was set free. He returned home in order to tell their tale.

This tale demonstrates the prevalent beliefs of the West at the time, that the indigenous peoples in many areas could be easily dominated and subjugated under the command of the British Empire. They believed that this would even be to their benefit. However, in "The Man Who Would Be King," Kipling shows that the consequences of such actions are not always the best and that the intentions of the imperialists will often not be the most beneficial.

When the men arrive to see the narrator, a British journalist in India, they tell him of their plan to become gods and he tells them they are being foolish—"You'll be cut to pieces before you're fifty miles across the Border...The people are utter brutes, and even if you reached them you couldn't do anything" (1859). Just like the reporter, many people believed that the natives were unreasonable and wild. Carnehan and Dravot continue to expound their plan of how they will become kings and be rich rulers of their own lands instead of being under British Imperial Rule. Just like these men, the imperialists who began territorializing India and other Eastern areas did not always have the most altruistic intentions and only sought personal gain.

At first their venture was successful, they were able to come into power and lived for quite some time among the people. However, Dravot becomes greedy and lustful and wants to take one of the natives to wife. This gets him into trouble, it is revealed that they are mortals, and the natives to try kill them. This commentary demonstrates that although the British Empire seems to be having success in their endeavors to expand, if the individuals and leaders who are running things become greedy or don't demonstrate the

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right intentions, things will back fire and cause problems. Kipling communicates this idea that if the two adventurers had been more focused on their people and being generous kings, they would not have been led to their downfall. Kipling was not opposing all types of imperialism, only the greedy and selfish leaders that had become prevalent in many areas of the East as the British Empire grew.

Like most leaders, in the beginning Dravot and Carnehan pledged to remain focused on their business enterprise in their contract that, among other things, said that they would not “ look at any Liguor, nor any Woman, black, white, or brown, so as to get mixed up with one or the other harmful...conduct ourselves with dignity and discretion” (1860). This, however, does not last and it leads to their downfall. Kipling helps us to see the importance of having men of integrity lead in these far-off areas of the British Empire, those who will stick to their obligations rather than being led away by greed and selfishness. This adventuring and profiteering type of man was prevalent in the British Empire because many felt that they could take advantage of the natives. Being a British journalist, Rudyard Kipling would have seen much of this and felt a distaste at the way the Imperialism was occurring and being handled by these men.

“ The Man Who Would Be King” was a short story written by Rudyard Kipling to reveal some of the evils and downfalls of the Imperialistic attitudes that were prevalent among Westerners during this period of great expansion of the British Empire. Although many among the British approved of the expansion of the empire, the methods and motivations behind the expansion were not always seen as generous and altruistic towards the natives. Kipling

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demonstrates the problems and consequences of these attitudes and the actions of these types of men who took advantage of the natives they believed were so easily dominated. He uses this short story to give his commentary on the moral implications and the effects of the expansion.