

Rudyard Kipling's Stories of Overcoming Existential Angst through Empathy

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Some of Rudyard Kipling's most powerful stories belong to a category we may characterize as narratives of existential-transcendental empathy -- I will also call it strange empathy -- with the strangeness of the empathy arising out of either their existentialism, or their transcendentalism, or both. In emphasizing the importance of empathy in Kipling's work I stand with a specific group of defenders of Kipling. (Dobree 1967, 32-55; Kemp 1988, 92-99; Tompkins 1958, 158-184; Angus Wilson 1979, 264-274; Edmund Wilson 1965, 139-147) All of us try to answer Kipling's critics, not the ones who criticize him on artistic or political grounds, but those who proclaim in various ways that his writing lacks concern for truly human feelings, thus implying that he lacks concern for compassion and empathy (Chesterton 1905, 44-53; Lewis 1965, 99-102; Tolstoy 1993).

Although there are many reasons for such fine critics as Chesterton, Lewis and Tolstoy to agree that there is a certain lack of humanity in Kipling, it is possible that one common ground for their dismay is their failure to see what was seen by defenders of Kipling such as poet T. S. Eliot, and science fiction writer John Brunner, in showing his admiration for Eliot's view of Kipling: namely that it sometimes seems as though Kipling dropped out of another planet. (Eliot, quoted in Brunner 1994) I am not claiming that Eliot or Brunner are existentialists or see Kipling as an existentialist, but only that their appreciation of the strangeness of his account of the human condition allows them to also appreciate an existential quality in Kipling that perhaps could not be seen or could be seen and not appreciated by someone with the more straightforward moral approach of a Chesterton, A Lewis, or a Tolstoy. In contrast, Dobree, Tompkins, Kemp, Edmund and Angus Wilson -- writers whom I agree with -- have all seen the compassion and empathy in Kipling, but have not probed its existential roots, and certainly not its existential -transcendental roots.

Yet the philosophy of existentialism was created by such nineteenth century literary figures as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky, who were, like Kipling, very much outside of the world of academic philosophy in, re-

spectively, Germany, Denmark and Russia. What they shared with each other and with Kipling was a sense of the strangeness of a human predicament in which it is often easier to lead a life of false tranquility, rather than to look within, and see what Kierkegaard called the fear, trembling, and sickness unto death that accompanies the human predicament. For both Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky the way out of that existential fear, trembling and sickness unto death, was transcendence. Nietzsche, too, was sometimes optimistic about there being a way out, and in his early writings, such as *The Birth of Tragedy*, was not always that far away from the transcendent either. All of these founders of existentialism could have recognized in Kipling's stories of existentialism and existential transcendental empathy a theme close to their hearts. (Nietzsche 2003, Kierkegaard 1954, Dostoyevsky 1993) My account of Kipling's narratives of strange empathy place him clearly in the company of this more recognized trio of founders of literary existentialism.

Virtually all of Kipling's central stories of strange -- existential-transcendental -- empathy, reflect his interest in, one, an ideal, transcendental realm, often supernatural or religious; and, two, his fascination with suffering, angst, mercy, empathy and compassion, and their existential effects on character. A highly selected list of these stories that combine to one degree or other the ideal, transcendental, supernatural/religious themes with the mercy, suffering, empathy and their existential effects on character themes begins with "The Phantom Rickshaw," and includes "Wireless," "In the Same Boat," "A Madonna of the Trenches," and the triptych "Unprofessional," "The Church that was at Antioch," and "Uncovenanted Mercies."

Kipling's interest in the ideal, transcendental, supernatural and religious often gives his stories an overwhelming sense of otherness. It is their sense of otherness that allows concern with themes of the ideal, transcendental, religious and supernatural, to link up with the themes of suffering, mercy, empathy and their existential effects on character. The key idea in all the strange empathy stories is that what appears to be completely other and alien can be reached, empathized with, and become less other. In all these narratives otherness and the existential angst associated with the protagonists' perception of it, is overcome through the ideal, the transcendental, the supernatural, the religious, and through mercy, empathy, compassion, suffering, and their effects on character. At the heart of these stories is, first, existential realization of otherness, and then striving to overcome it through the ideal, the transcendental, the supernatural, the religious, and through mercy, empathy, suffering and their existential effects on character.

For example, in "The Phantom Rickshaw," originally published in 1888, as Kipling was beginning his writing career in India, when the protagonist begins to empathize with the ghost that haunts him, this may appear at first to be a strange sort of empathy, as indeed, it is. Nevertheless, the human grounding of this strange love story is so naturalistic that most readers can go directly from their experience and naturalistic understanding of love and courtship, to its extension into a ghostly world, and from there step into one of Kipling's first clear expressions of the obliteration of otherness; of the existential angst associated with understanding the fact of otherness; and of the expansion of empathy: themes that ultimately turn the ghostliness of the story on its head. In this narrative the ghostly woman In the phantom rickshaw who haunts the man who jilted her for another woman, does not, from another world, recapture a human love that she loses through death, but rather, because of her ghostly otherness is able to teach the jilting lover how to love in away he never did during her life. She is not so much loved as a woman, as she is as a ghost, as a pure expression of otherness that forces the jilter to confront his existential condition of being alone and unable to identify with another person. She unleashes a force of empathy and identification with otherness. It is not, certainly, in their failed romance in the human world, that empathy is expanded, nor even in their interaction as lovers, when she is a supernatural and transcendental force, and he is still alive. It is in his acceptance of the ghostly world that empathy subjectively expands, although, of course, the reader may or may not choose to go along with the idea that the objective basis for expansion of empathy is the reality of the ghost. It does not, however, matter whether the ghost is transcendently or ideally real. What matters is that in coming back to the jilter, the jilted woman poses questions of transcendentalism that force the jilter into an existential crisis, which, like all existential crises, shakes his being to the root, and is alleviated only through empathy. (Kipling 1986, 172-177)

"Wireless," originally published in 1904 as Kipling began a new part of his writing career, in England, describes a supernatural ideal of expressive power that is achieved only through expansion of empathy. In "Wireless" the sense of otherness takes the form of a supernatural John Keats, going through the throes of expressive struggle to create or recreate "The Eve of Ste. Agnes," through the pen of a suffering and consumptive pharmacist, who does not recognize the similarity of his situation to that of the great English poet, has never read his poetry, and displays physical symptoms of Keats' expressive-imaginative struggle for the transcendent ideal, as his pen

writes down what the supernatural Keats is delivering to him, which is not just “The Eve of Ste. Agnes,” but also the expressive-imaginative power that went into it. The implication is that not only the poem, but also the suffering of the supernatural poet as medium, can bring mercy to his empathic amanuensis. The narrative gains emotive power through its path from a commonplace situation to a situation of existential angst, in which, through empathy, mercy is finally given to the suffering, but not without cost. The amanuensis must suffer in order to empathize with the transcendental Keats enough so that he can bring his message to earth. (Kipling 1987a, 196-199)

“In the Same Boat,” originally published in 1917 at the beginning of Kipling’s modernist period, intensifies and elaborates the otherness, transcendentalism, existentialism, mercy, suffering, empathy scenario. The other here is another life that the two protagonists, a man and a woman brought together by suffering, have lived. At first, their other lives come to them in nightmares, the terror of which has caused them both to become drug addicts. Ultimately, the terrifying dreams are explained to their satisfaction: the nightmares come from real experiences attending their births, and there is a hint that their respective experiences and births were more connected than they appear to be, even when finally explained. But at first it is only suffering that brings the two together, and the empathy they have for each other’s suffering allows them to overcome the drug addiction. But joint therapy toward overcoming drug addiction is not really what the story is about. This story, even more than the “Phantom Rickshaw” or “Wireless,” begins to portray empathy and the urge to identify with an other, as a force that transcends, and indeed is often inconsistent with, all typical expressions of love and friendship. The point is clarified in the poem attached to the end of the story, “Helen All Alone.”

There was darkness under heaven
 For an hour’s space-
 Darkness that we knew was given,
 us for special grace.
 Sun and moon and stars were hid,
 God had left his throne,
 When Helen came to me, she did
 Helen all alone.
 Side by side (because our fate
 Damned us ere our birth)

We stole out of Limbo Gate,
Looking for the Earth.
Hand in pulling hand and
Fear no Dreams have known,
Helen ran with me, she did,
Helen, all alone.

When the horror passing speech
Hunted us along,
Each laid hold on each, and each
Found the other strong.
In the teeth of things forbid,
And reason overthrown,
Helen stood by me, she did,
Helen all alone!

When, at last, we heard the fires
Dull and die away,
When at last our linked desires,
Dragged us up to day,
When at last our souls were rid
Of what the night had shown,
Helen passed from me, she did
Helen all alone.

Let her go and find a mate,
and I will find a Bride,
knowing naught of Limbo Gate,
and Who are penned inside,
There is knowledge God forbid,
More than one should own.
Helen went from me she did,
Oh my soul be glad she did.
Helen, all alone. (Kipling 1917, 103-104)

The poem makes clear the structure of a Kiplingesque drive to strange empathy as a means of overcoming otherness and the existential angst associated with it. (1) It must purify itself of ordinary human emotions. (2)

It is at its strongest when it is generated by suffering and/or mercy. (3) It is usually tied to a feeling for the transcendent or to the transcendent itself. (4) The characteristic feeling it must work through is an existential dark night of the soul, in which everything is lost, and only becomes replaced through empathic identification with an other. Although the poem brings these themes out only abstractly, with the poem's help we can see concretely in the narrative itself that (1) the force pulsing toward empathy and identification with the other does not tie the empathic couple to a conventional happy ending. They go their own way. (2) Empathy is engendered by the mercy and suffering of the two protagonists. (3) Mercy and empathy are seen as impossible without the transcendent link between the couple. (4) On the way to (1) pure empathy engendered by (2) mercy and suffering and (3) transcendence or the idea of it, the couple go through existential despair, in which all normal props of life are kicked out from under them. (99-102) From now on the other four key narratives of existential-transcendental empathy between humans will possess all these features of this paradigm narrative, but we also can see now that "The phantom Rickshaw" and "Wireless," also possesses them in preliminary form. And the four late stories of existential-transcendental empathy read like intensifications of the "Helen all Alone" credo.

"A Madonna of the Trenches," originally published in 1926, well after Kipling's entrance into modernism, is so extreme in its account of transcendental-existential empathy, that it almost makes the other six key narratives appear far too lacking in rigor of application. This is misleading. The three stories leading up to and including "In the Same Boat," in some ways are stronger precisely for their lack of such complete rigor, and the triptych from Kipling's third modernist collection, *Limits and Renewals*, that caps his lifetime exploration of strange empathy, together perhaps make a more complete case for the empathic overcoming of otherness theme than the completely stark "Madonna of the Trenches," which also receives explanation through a poem, in this case not Kipling's own, but Swinburne's lines that serve as epigraph.

Whatever a man of the sons of men
 Shall say to his heart of the Lords above,
 They have shown man verily, once and again,
 Marvelous mercy and infinite love. (Kipling 1926, 239)

The events of "A Madonna of the Trenches" are so bizarre that it is almost impossible to retell the story without telling it in the manner that Kipling tells it, enclosing it in another story. The other story is of the mental suffering of Stanswicke, a World War One English soldier, whose suffering comes after the war. In this case it is not only the war and its trenches that caused the trauma, but also the Madonna of the trenches. Stanswicke finally is able to tell his story, much later, under prodding by the same doctor who originally gave him short term treatment. The doctor, meeting Stanswicke again, finally has an opportunity to get the full story from him, and finds out that Stanswicke saw the Madonna, and that he was the only living person who saw her. John, the soldier who loved the Madonna, and with whom Stanswicke was encamped among the trenches, also saw her, after she was resurrected from death caused either by cancer or suicide. It is the vision of the Madonna that dominates Stanswicke's narration of his trauma, and even overshadows the story of John's suicide aside the trenches, which is presented as an effort to rejoin the Madonna. Thus part of the drama is the gradual uncovering of what Stanswicke saw and heard. Because of the indirect way the story is told everything is shrouded in the transcendental apparatus of the vision of the resurrection of the Madonna, and John's suicide aiming for a similar resurrection and reunion with her. The doctor asks Stanswicke "And there is anther thing -- that hymn you were shouting till I put you under. It was something about Mercy and Love. Remember it?" "I'll try....'Whatever a man may say in his heart unto the Lord, yea verily I say unto you -- Gawd has shown man, again and again, marvelous mercy -an' somethin' or other love.'" (Kipling 1926, 246)

"A Madonna of the Trenches" thus reaches the outer limits possible for an expression of a transcendental, supernatural, or religious ideal entity or being that brings empathy and mercy to the suffering. "A Madonna of the Trenches sets a pattern for the increasingly elliptical modernist style of Kipling's greatest twentieth century narratives, in the way that it unfolds from the commonplace to existential angst, a pattern which reappears again with Kipling's powerful empathy triptych, "Unprofessional," "The Church that was at Antioch" and "Uncovenanted Mercies, all originally published in his 1932 modernist collection to which he gave the existentialist title, *Limits and Renewals*." Here the starkness of "A Madonna" has softened somewhat, without removing the power of its multiple and nuanced expression of the empathy and otherness theme.

In "Unprofessional," the first part of the triptych, and "The Church that

was at Antioch,” the second part, both protagonists who expand empathy and overcome otherness, are unprofessional at accomplishing these tasks. The unprofessional in “Unprofessional” is a humble medical assistant who accomplishes through empathy what the doctors cannot, with their science fiction exploits achieve: the ability to give the woman who is the subject of their experimental attempts to cure her, the desire to live. (Kipling 1987b, 203-205) In the second part of the triptych, “The Church that was at Antioch,” Valens, the Roman hero, stands outside of the world of St. Paul and St. Peter that builds the church that was at Antioch, partly because he follows a pagan God, Mithra, and partly because his job as soldier is to protect the apostles. His world seems mundane compared to theirs, but when one of the crowd he has protected Paul and Peter from stabs Valens, he reveals that through empathy he has incorporated into his Mithraism the mercy that both Paul and Peter embrace. At the end both mercy and suffering are seen as states that can transform characters above the commonplace, and lead them to a purer and stranger empathy for an other. (99-100)

Finally, in the third part of the Triptych, and the concluding story about Limits and Renewals, “Uncovenanted Mercies,” the theme of the ideal realm and its impact on mercy, suffering, empathy and existential throes of character, emerges strongly, when the comic debate between the common place sounding angels guarding an unhappy couple, who were destined never to meet, but who nevertheless meet anyway, turns into truly a debate between real cosmic and transcendental angels. The debate goes from comic to transcendental as we see unfold the existential struggle of the couple to achieve mercies and empathy for each other’s suffering, and to live their impossible covenants, and to achieve even uncovenanted mercy from transcendental forces and from their own existential suffering. (Kipling 1987b, 275-279)

The key idea in all Kipling’s strange empathy stories is that what appears to be completely other and alien can be reached, empathized with, and become less other. In all these narratives otherness is overcome through the ideal, the transcendental, the supernatural, the religious, and through mercy, empathy, suffering and their effects on character. Kipling’s great narratives of strange empathy depict striving to overcome otherness through the ideal, the transcendental, the supernatural, the religious, and through mercy, empathy, suffering and their existential effects on character. “Uncovenanted Mercies” demonstrates again that Kipling reaches heights of expressive power when he depicts strange empathy and its links to the human

existential situation. The angels in “Uncovenanted Mercies” resemble the ghost in “The Phantom Rickshaw,” the supernatural Keats in “Wireless,” the Madonna of the Trenches, Mithra In “The Church that was at Antioch” and the miracle bringing unprofessional in “Unprofessional.” They also play a mercy and empathy bringing role which they share not only these supernatural beings, but also with humans who achieve or inspire unusual empathy, from the ghostly jilted lover in “the phantom Rickshaw,” to the suffering pharmacist-poet in “Wireless,” to the suffering couple in “In the Same boat,” to the Madonna of the trenches, to the woman rescued by the empathizing “unprofessional” medical worker, to the pagan Christian, Valens. all Kipling’s strange empathy stories blend the ideal, supernatural and religious theme and the mercy/suffering/empathy and their existential effects on character theme, and in doing so add to the canon of existentialist philosophy expressed through literature.

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