

# War & Witness- Poetry as a Response to Conflict and Trauma

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## Introduction

Rudyard Kipling, a renowned English writer, poet, and journalist, is often celebrated for his contributions to British imperialist literature. However, his works also offer profound insights into the human cost of war, reflecting themes of suffering, trauma, and the consequences of conflict. Some of Kipling's poignant works are *Tommy*, *My Boy Jack*, and *Boots: Poetry as a Response to Conflict and Trauma*, which delves into the emotional and psychological aftermath of war.

In this paper, we will explore Kipling's portrayal of war and trauma in the poems, analysing the themes and the relevance of his work in today's context. This analysis seeks to understand how poetry, particularly Kipling's, acts as both a response to and a reflection of the horrors of war, and how it functions as a form of witnessing traumatic events. Through examining Kipling's life, historical context, and literary techniques, serves as a powerful commentary on the emotional and psychological toll of conflict on individuals and societies.

## Context and Background

Rudyard Kipling's life and experiences played a significant role in shaping his views on war and its effects. Born in 1865, Kipling grew up during the height of British imperialism. He spent much of his early life in India, where he worked as a journalist and writer, and witnessed firsthand the tensions and violence associated with the British Empire's colonial efforts. One of the key events in Kipling's life was his experience during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), where he supported the British war effort. However, it was not until the tragic death of his only son, John, during World War I, that Kipling began to deeply reflect on the true horrors of war. There are facets in war poems written by Kipling.

## Tommy

In 'Tommy' Kipling details the terrible ways in which young soldiers were treated during peace time. They were refused service in bars, they were mocked, they were not allowed in theaters and they were refused a lot of the bare necessities of existence. Such as, better food for us, and schools, and fires and all. They are met with contempt and while the common drunk manages to be tolerated.

All of this changes, however, once the country goes to the war. Tommy is celebrated and thanked. People are concerned with his well-being and his soul, and deem him and his fellow soldiers a thin red line of heroes and the “Saviors of our country”.

Tommy, the poem's speaker, tries to mediate between these binaries of love and war; he explains that “we aren't no thin red 'eroes, nor we aren't no blackguards too/. But single men in barracks, most remarkable like you”.

If their behavior occasionally does tend towards the raucous people must remember, “Single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints”. Tommy is painfully aware of the hypocrisy that complicates his life. Through ‘Tommy’ Kipling defending the young soldiers who took up the noble task of defending their country and of arguing for their humanity and frailty even while acknowledging their courage and fighting prowess.

### **My Boy Jack**

Rudyard wrote the poem “My Boy Jack” in 1916, inspired by the loss of his son, John, during the battle of Loos in 1915, though it is written as a poem about a sailor son, not directly as his own son.

The poem was written to commemorate his son John, who died during the World War I. He was killed in action in France at the battles of Loos after being there for only three weeks. Unfortunately, he was on the “Missing believed wounded” list for 2 years.

Although the connection of John's death to the poem “My Boy Jack” is questionable as some scholars say that the poem had nothing to do with John and was merely an expression of the poet's keen understanding of the sacrifices necessary in war.

The poem is a bleak and melancholy. It is very short and structured like a dialogue. One voice continues to ask for news of their son while another voice presented in detached and otherworldly italics, offers scant hope. The second voice uses the image of receding tide and blowing wind to create a sense of absence, as in the absence of the son who went away to war. This poem evokes the loss felt by parents who lose their children to war. World War one was particularly a brutal war and this sad simple poem encapsulates the profound loss in a very effective fashion.

The End of the poem offers reproach meant to mitigate the sadness felt by mothers and fathers, who lost their child: “Then hold your head up all the more, /This tide/ And every tide; / Because he was the son you bore/ And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!” Kipling may have felt guilty about pushing his son to fight, but he still felt intense patriotism and civic duty. He knew that young men did have to die for their country, and still believed the British Military to be the glory of the age.

### **Boots**

The poem is subtitled “infantry Column” and many of the words are repeated many times to give the impressions of marching and monotony.

Speaker says the soldiers are slogging over Africa and their boots- the word repeated four times- are moving up and down. There is no discharge in the war. They march miles and miles each day, previous day too. Their boots move up and down again and there is no discharge in the war.

This poem was included in the 1903 volume. ‘The Five Nations’, is one of the most charming and although the subject matter is not altogether light hearted. It is known for his elocutionary emphasis, as reading it out loud requires some skill in making sure the meter and tone are adhered to just so. The repetition of the words reinforces the subject of the poem- that is the endless marching of soldiers in war time.

The poem depicts soldiers marching throughout Africa for hours and hours, days and days. The soldiers hear and see and feel the boots of their thousands of companions without ceasing. They

must try to avoid going crazy by thinking of anything other than this monotony. The monotony becomes even greater than starvation, dehydration & fatigue. For the soldiers the endless stomping of boots comes to signify the while drudgery of war itself.

### **Conclusion**

Poems can be seen as a product of Kipling's evolving perspective on war. While earlier works often glorified British imperialism, his later writings, particularly after World War I, express a much more somber and critical view of war. The poem, written as a response to the pervasive destruction and human suffering brought on by conflict, highlights Kipling's recognition of war's far-reaching emotional consequences, particularly the trauma faced by soldiers and civilians alike.

Kipling's understanding of trauma is often tied to the psychological wounds that remain long after the battlefield is silent. In these poems, he moves beyond the glorification of war, focusing instead on its aftermath—how it continues to haunt those who survive, as well as those who bear witness to its devastation

Kipling explores several powerful themes related to the nature of war, trauma, and the role of memory in shaping post-war consciousness. The central theme of the poem is the idea of “witnessing” the effects of war, both for those who experience the violence firsthand and those who observe it from a distance. Through vivid imagery and somber tones, Kipling emphasizes the long-lasting emotional scars inflicted by war.

One of the primary symbols in the poem is the concept of “witnessing.” In this context, the term goes beyond mere observation of events. It reflects a deeper, more emotional engagement with the suffering of others, suggesting that to witness war is to be forever marked by its brutality. The “witness” is not just a passive observer; they are also a part of the trauma, whether they are soldiers on the frontlines or civilians far from the battle.

Kipling uses imagery to evoke the sensory experience of war—descriptions of destruction, death, and despair are juxtaposed with symbols of survival, resilience, and the haunting presence of those left behind. This duality highlights the tension between life and death, memory, and oblivion. The poem also touches upon the psychological trauma that remains long after the physical violence has ceased, particularly through the recurring motif of memory and its role in both healing and tormenting the survivors.

### **Relevance of the Poem Today**

Though written in the early 20th century, Kipling's writings are deeply relevant in the context of modern-day conflicts. The psychological toll of war, particularly the trauma experienced by soldiers and civilians, continues to be a major issue in contemporary society. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition affecting many veterans of modern wars, echoes the themes Kipling explores in the poem. The emotional scars left by war are not confined to the battlefield but extend into everyday life, affecting families, communities, and entire nations.

Kipling's exploration of witnessing trauma is also relevant in the age of modern media, where images and stories of conflict are constantly broadcast around the world. The act of “witnessing” war is no longer limited to those physically present in combat zones but extends to anyone who consumes news and media. This global witness, much like the individual observer in Kipling's poem, can experience the emotional weight of conflict without direct involvement.

Moreover, Kipling's poem invites reflection on the role of literature and poetry in responding to trauma. Just as Kipling's poem served as a form of catharsis and a means of processing the emotional aftermath of war, literature today continues to serve as a powerful tool for confronting the psychological wounds of conflict. The relevance of his writing is found not only in its portrayal

of historical trauma but also in its timeless exploration of how art can help us understand and process the horrors of war

On the whole, through the referred poems (Tommy, My boy Jack and Boots) Kipling's has verified the various difficulties, great and small in a soldier's life, although not a soldier Kipling understood the reality of the psychological, emotional and physical duress referred by the young men who went off to fight for their country. He embraced various causes that fought for good treatment for veterans.

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