If—

POEM TEXT

If you can keep your head when all about you
  Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
  But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
  Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
  And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
  If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
  And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
  Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
  And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
  And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
  And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
  To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
  Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
  Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
  If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
  With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
  And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

SUMMARY

If you can stay calm when everyone around you is panicking and holding you responsible for their panic; if you can be confident even when no one trusts you, while still taking other people's concerns into consideration; if you can be patient; if you can avoid lying even when people lie about you; if you can not hate anyone even when they hate you; if you can be virtuous in these ways, but still not think too highly of yourself;

If you can have big ambitions, without becoming a servant to them; if you can be analytical, but not get lost in analysis for its own sake; if you can take a measured approach to successes and failures, seeing them both as temporary and not especially meaningful; if you can handle it when unscrupulous people distort your sincere words to deceive the ignorant; if you can lose everything you've worked for and get right back to rebuilding it from the ground up;

If you can risk everything you've earned on a single gamble, lose it all, and begin again from nothing without complaining; if you can push yourself to total mental and physical exhaustion and still keep going with only your willpower to support and sustain you;

If you can mingle with the masses without losing your own moral compass, or travel in the highest society without becoming haughty; if neither your enemies nor your friends can hurt your feelings; if you can treat everyone with respect, but avoid idolizing anyone in particular; if you can fill up every second of unrelenting time with worthwhile action, then the world will be your oyster—And, more importantly, you will be a true man, my son.

THEMES

COMPOSURE AND SELF-RESTRAINT

The speaker of "If—" champions a morality built on moderation. In this poem, he advises his son to move through life with composure, and to always exercise self-control, integrity, and humility. This means never letting "Triumph" nor "Disaster"—events either good *or* bad—go to one's head. Composure and self-restraint, the speaker implies, makes it possible to act with dignity in all circumstances and to lead a respectable and virtuous life.

No matter what happens, the speaker believes, it's important that people keep their cool. He tells his son to "keep [his] head" about him even when everyone around him is losing their composure—not to respond with vitriol just because other people might "hate[]" him, for example. Similarly, the speaker says that his son should calmly devote himself to rebuilding his life if it ever goes to shambles, encouraging him to remain reasonable and diligent even when times are tough.

The speaker also insists that his son shouldn't become smug

about his own measured and virtuous way of navigating life: "[D]on't look too good, nor talk too wise," the speaker says, steering his son away from vanity (in the sense of merely wanting to *look* like a good guy) in favor of simple levelheadedness. Essentially, the speaker's saying that people need to find a happy medium between confidence and modesty (lest their self-assuredness blind them to their own shortcomings). Those who succumb to neither vice nor vanity are those who are capable of persevering through hardship, their "Will" always telling them to "Hold on!"

The idea, then, is that composure leads to strength and integrity: the speaker insists that the world will be his son's oyster if only he practices restraint and discipline. These qualities will also turn the boy into a true "Man," the speaker says, indicating that he thinks respectable men are defined by their ability to lead measured, dignified lives. (Remember, this is an Edwardian poem with an essentialist view of gender—see the theme on Manhood and Masculinity for more about that.)

All of these ideas about composure and restraint align with the stereotypically British "stiff upper lip"—in other words, the idea that one should be resilient in the face of adversity. This was a particularly popular worldview in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when a number of British poets embraced the Ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism, which urged indifference to both pain and pleasure. Because this indifference is so similar to the moderation the speaker tells his son to adopt, it's reasonable to read "If—" as the speaker's argument for why British society (and in particular, British *men*) should embrace Stoic ideals.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

MANHOOD AND MASCULINITY

To the Edwardian-era speaker of "If—," manhood isn't something one is born with, but a quality one earns. The poem reflects some rather old-fashioned ideas about masculinity; after all, the self-sufficiency and levelheadedness the speaker describes would be virtues in *any* person, and marking them out as specifically male feels antiquated and sexist. Yet poem also doesn't just grant every man these qualities, and instead suggests that men must *earn* manhood. Masculinity, the poem insists, is a demanding goal that one must strive for, and the few who achieve virtuous manhood enjoy a rock-solid sense of self. To be a capital-M "Man," in this speaker's view, is a virtue, an achievement, and its own reward.

The whole poem is built around a set of goalposts, standards of good behavior that a boy has to achieve in order to become a "Man." Manhood isn't inborn or natural, the poem suggests, but a state one achieves through self-sufficiency, self-mastery, and stability. To be a man, the "son" the speaker addresses must learn to "keep [his] head," "lose, and start again at [his] beginnings," and "talk with crowds and keep [his] virtue": in other words, he has to develop an inner security that makes him brave, centered, and unflappable. The sheer length of the poem's list of instructions suggests that this is hard work!

The rewards of this kind of difficult self-mastery, the speaker suggests, are great: being a "Man" means even more than having "the Earth and everything that's in it" at one's disposal. Manhood, in this poem's view, is its own reward, providing its possessors with an unshakeable sense of self. The speaker's capitalization of the word "Man" suggests that he sees manhood as an honorable *title*: becoming a "Man" is like earning a degree or being knighted.

To the modern reader, all this might sound narrow and sexist, since it seems to single certain good human qualities out as specifically male. But this vision of a distinct and virtuous masculinity fits right into the speaker's Edwardian worldview, in which gender roles were clear, separate, and rigid—and male authority was taken for granted. Reading masculinity as an achievement, the speaker makes it clear that, in his view, the powers and responsibilities of Edwardian maleness are earned, not automatic.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:

"If—" jumps directly into giving advice: using apostrophe, the speaker addresses an unidentified "you" with some choice guidance about how best to live life. At the very end of the poem, it'll become clear that the "you" here is the speaker's son, but in these opening lines, it might just as easily be the reader. The advice the speaker has to offer, this structure suggests, applies not just to the son he's speaking to, but to people in general (or rather, as the poem will later make clear, to *men* in general).

The speaker starts a lot of ideas in these first lines, but he doesn't finish them. Instead, using anaphora to extend his thought, he starts to build a collection of advice without coming to a conclusion about what, exactly, will happen if the reader does what he advises:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

This parallel construction repeats through the whole poem: in fact, the poem is one long sentence built from similar clauses. The suspense this shape creates draws readers through the poem, making them wonder what all this advice will lead to.

First and foremost, the speaker emphasizes the importance of keeping one's cool even when everyone else is going out of their minds. The speaker also advises that his reader should remain calm if others "blam[e]" him for something that has gone wrong. Similarly, the son should "trust [him]self" when everyone else "doubt[s]" him, but he should also acknowledge that he's not perfect and that others might have good reason for "doubting" him.

Both of these suggestions show the speaker's belief in the importance of maintaining one's composure, poise, and humility. The general message here is that one should never let emotions get the best of one, and should avoid stooping to the level of one's enemies. This general outlook borrows from Stoicism, an Ancient Greek philosophy that urges people to resist the influence of extreme emotion, regardless of whether that emotion is pleasant or painful.

These lines establish the speaker's use of iambic pentameter, a meter in which each line contains five iambs, or a foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Take, for example, line 2:

Are los- | ing theirs | and blam- | ing it | on you;

This bouncy rhythm couches the speaker's stern advice in musical language: there's upbeat energy here, not just admonitions.

LINES 5-8

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

The speaker continues to advise his son, telling him to have patience and to never compromise his morals. When somebody tells lies about the son, the speaker says, he should resist the temptation to tell lies in return. Similarly, he shouldn't hate people just because they hate him. The general idea, then, is that the speaker's son should hold himself to the highest possible standards even when it's difficult to do so (and even when other people aren't extending him the same courtesy).

But this doesn't mean he should feel all high and mighty for being an exemplary, principled person. The speaker tells him to behave in these virtuous ways, but then says, "And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise." In other words, the son shouldn't act like he's better than anyone else, nor should he talk like he knows everything.

The speaker of "If—" is all about moderation, so it makes sense that he wants his son to behave virtuously without letting his good character go to his head. Instead, the son should lead the well-balanced, dignified life of someone who has integrity but isn't vain about it.

These lines feature polyptoton, as the speaker varies the forms of the words "wait," "lied," and "hated":

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies
Or being hated don't give way to hating,

These slight variations suggest the self-restraint the son will have to practice in order to be a virtuous man: even when he's "hated" he mustn't "give way to hating" in return.

LINES 9-12

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:

The first part of the second stanza follows the same grammatical construction as the first, with the speaker using anaphora to repeat the words "if you can" at the beginning of almost every line. This time, the speaker tells his son to:

- be ambitious without letting ambition dominate his life;
- be thoughtful, but also go beyond merely *thinking* about things (that is, act!);
- take both success and misfortune in his stride, treating them the same because both are ultimately unimportant.

This advice emphasizes the importance of moderation—of not leaning too far in any particular direction. The speaker thinks people should be ambitious, for example, but not *too* ambitious. The same thing goes for thoughtfulness: it's good to think things through, but analysis is pointless if it doesn't lead to a tangible result.

Personification is prominent in these lines, as the speaker talks about dreams as if they can become domineering "master[s]"—an idea that highlights just how powerful fantasies sometimes feel, as if they can develop a mind of their own and control a person.

There's also the personification of "Triumph and Disaster," both of which the speaker calls "impostors." This presents "Triumph and Disaster" as if they're people masquerading as something they're not, suggesting that success and failure aren't what people think they are: although people think success is glorious and failure or misfortune is devastating, the speaker believes that both are essentially meaningless—they don't last, and they

don't say anything about a person's true character.

Once again, then, the speaker encourages the son not to let anything—either good or bad—go to his head or affect the way he moves through the world. These ideas pretty closely resemble Stoicism, the Ancient Greek philosophy that argued for presence of mind and indifference to both pain and pleasure. For the Stoics, life was all about being unshakably and unreactively virtuous—a belief that clearly resonates with the speaker of "If—."

LINES 13-16

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

In these lines, the speaker continues to recommend patience, composure, and persistence, telling his son not to succumb to frustration. This is easy enough in most circumstances, but the speaker specifically tells the son to keep his cool when people take his words and dishonestly "twist[]" them around—a deeply frustrating thing! And if everything the son has ever worked for ends up going to ruin, the speaker metaphorically suggests that he should quietly recommit himself to "build[ing] 'em up" again using the "worn-out tools" available to him (that is, the tried-and-true skills he has developed throughout life—perhaps the very skills the speaker is advising him to develop here).

At its core, this advice is about maintaining a sense of integrity in the face of hardship. It's difficult to stand idly by while "knaves"—or foolish scoundrels—wilfully misinterpret your words, but this is exactly what the speaker tells the son to do; he should simply "bear" it. And if things go so badly that everything the son has devoted his life to ends up in shambles, he shouldn't complain or blame others, but instead have the strength and diligence to set to work rebuilding all that was lost. And this requires not only willpower and dedication, but also the self-sufficiency and confidence to accept responsibility for one's own life.

By this point in the poem, the rhyme scheme is clear: each stanza follows a singsongy, alternating ABAB CDCD pattern. This gives the speaker's words a musical quality that pairs well with the assonant /a/ sound in the words "knaves" and "make," and the assonant /oo/ sound in "stoop" and "tools." These distinctive, harmonious sounds make the speaker's words memorable—an appropriate effect, given that the poem is full of life lessons the speaker wants the son to remember.

LINES 17-20

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss:

These four lines cover just one hypothetical situation, in which the speaker imagines his son winning a large amount of money, losing it on a gamble, and then quietly setting himself to the task of making it back without complaining about losing it in the first place.

In this metaphorical image, the speaker suggests both that his son should be brave enough to take big risks—and that he shouldn't complain when those risks don't pan out, but quietly get back to work rebuilding his life from the beginning.

This is a slightly different perspective on composure and self-restraint, one that has to do with accountability. Whereas the speaker has previously urged the son to respond with integrity when *other* people do him harm, now he stresses the importance of showing humility after the son makes a misjudgment of his own. The poem implies that true dignity means accepting one's own misfortunes and missteps with grace; people shouldn't let their mistakes upset them too much, just do whatever's necessary to fix them.

Line 20 is particularly consonant, as the speaker repeats the /r/ sound multiple times:

> And never breathe a word about your loss:

This calls attention to the line, especially because the /r/ sound spotlights the phrase "never breathe." The /r/ sound in this moment gives the language an edgy quality, as if mimicking a frustrated person talking through clenched teeth. Consonance thus helps the speaker hint at the anger and disappointment people often have to work through in order to maintain a sense of composure and dignity. "Never breath[ing] a word" about a big loss isn't easy, these sounds suggest—but it's the right thing to do.

LINES 21-24

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

In this section, the speaker talks about willpower, suggesting that the son should learn to endure both mental and physical strife. The poem has already made clear the importance of withstanding emotional hardship, but now the speaker focuses more specifically on the body, saying that the son should "force" his "heart and nerve and sinew" to do what he wants even after all of these things are tired or depleted. The "heart and nerve and sinew" here can also be read as metaphors for qualities like passion, courage, and persistence. But the speaker's point is, being a truly virtuous person means pushing one's whole self—body, soul, and mind—to its limits.

The thing that drives this kind of persistent strength, the speaker suggests, is the "Will," which the speaker personifies, imagining that it's like an internal friend, urging an exhausted striver to "Hold on!" This presents willpower as a motivating

force that provides encouragement and support even when it seems impossible to go on.

Line 21 features polysyndeton, as the speaker repeats the word "and":

> If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew

This pile-up of "and"s evokes the slogging persistence this passage describes: each "and" feels like another laborious step forward.

There are also a couple of noticeable internal rhymes in this section:

> If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
> To serve your turn long after they are gone
> And so hold on when there is nothing in you

Rhyming "nerve" with "serve" and "gone" with "on," the speaker suggests the difficulty (and rewards) of the persistence he's advocating for here. If his son achieves real self-mastery, his "nerve" will be there to "serve" him, and even when his energy is "gone" he'll still go "on."

LINES 25-28

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:

Once again underlining the importance of humility, the speaker tells the son to associate with the mass of everyday people but not to sacrifice his high moral standards. (There's a touch of turn-of-the-century British snobbery in the idea that "talk[ing] with crowds" might mar one's "virtue.") On the flip side, though, the son should also keep the company of highly respected people (like "Kings") without becoming haughty.

Simply put, the son should always remain grounded, never letting himself lean too far in any particular direction. Everything in life, the speaker implies, should be approached with moderation. The son should also refuse to let anyone—whether they're "foes" or "loving friends"—affect him so much that they can actually "hurt" him or do lasting damage to his life. This isn't to say that the son should live an isolated life; rather, he should respect everyone, but refrain from *idolizing* anyone.

The speaker uses the consonant /k/ sound throughout these lines, giving the language a clear, sharp tone:

> If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
> Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
> If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
> If all men count with you, but none too much

The intensity of those /k/ sounds is softened a little by the subtle /f/ consonance in "If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you" in line 27. By using both soft and harsh forms of consonance, the speaker suggests both sternness and care: after all, he's only giving his son all this advice because he wants him to live well.

LINES 29-32

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

As the speaker comes to the poem's conclusion, he suggests that his son should be the kind of person who wastes no time. The speaker presents this idea metaphorically, saying that the son should "fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run." Simply put, the son should be so dedicated to working hard and improving himself that he fills every second of time—which is always ticking "unforgiving[ly]" past—with purposeful action. The son should seize every minute he has, never letting time get away from him when he could be making progress.

This is, of course, a very disciplined, serious way to move through life, but in this speaker's view, it takes serious discipline to earn life's ultimate rewards.

Remember, this whole poem has been one long sentence, using anaphora on the words "If you can" to build a pile of advice without ever coming to a full conclusion. This means that everything the speaker has said until now has been in service of the rewards he finally reveals in the last two lines. "If" the son follows all of the advice in this poem, the speaker concludes, the world will be the son's oyster. But more importantly, the speaker adds, the son will become a true "Man."

Manhood, in this speaker's view, isn't something you get just from being born male. Rather, it's a title one achieves through discipline, self-sufficiency, and virtue. Capitalizing the word "Man," the speaker makes achieving manhood sound like getting a degree or being knighted: it's a reward, an honor, and a milestone.

Contemporary readers might find this poem's grand conclusion sexist. After all, all the virtues the speaker champions would be good qualities in a person of any gender. This poem is very much a product of its time; Kipling wrote around the turn of the 20th century, when gender roles were rigid and men ran the world. All in all, though, the poem's main takeaway is that behaving with composure, restraint, and diligence will lead to a worthwhile life—a message that isn't limited to men in the age of the British Empire.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker uses apostrophe throughout the poem to address his son. However, the fact that the speaker is talking to his son doesn't become clear until the very end of the poem. Until that moment, the speaker simply uses the second person, saying things like:

> If you can keep your head when all about you
> Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;

Because the speaker uses "you" so much, the majority of the poem reads as if it's addressed to anyone at all. Everyone who reads "If—," it seems, could very well imagine that the words are intended for them. Or, at the very least, readers can reasonably assume that the poem is about humanity in general, as the speaker dispenses advice that more or less applies to everybody.

Of course, it becomes clear in the last line that the speaker has his son in mind, as he says: "[...] you'll be a Man, my son!" But this doesn't necessarily mean that the poem doesn't *also* apply to other people. To the contrary, the speaker's use of apostrophe makes the poem feel universal, since the speaker lays out a bunch of advice that isn't specific to just one person, but to all of humanity (or at least, in his view, to all men).

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

ANAPHORA

Anaphora shapes "If—": the poem's ideas of what it means to be a man are built around the repeated opening words "If you can." Consider, for example, lines 9-11:

> If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
> If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,
> If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

The repetition of this phrase gives the poem a regular, musical quality, as if it's a nursery rhyme or an old tale—perhaps one the speaker has recited to his son time and again.

This anaphora also emphasizes the word "if," highlighting the idea that happiness and success are contingent upon good behavior. In other words, the son will lead a fulfilling life **if** he manages to take on the composed, self-assured worldview that the speaker recommends.

Anaphora also allows the speaker to create a long, slow built to the poem's conclusion. Through his repeated "If"s, he piles up a heap of advice without finishing his sentence, waiting until the very end to finally say what, exactly, will happen "if [the son] can" behave in all these ways. Anaphora thus creates momentum, drawing readers from line to line as they wait to find out what all the speaker's advice will lead to.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "If you can"
- **Line 3:** "If you can"
- **Line 5:** "If you can"
- **Line 6:** "Or being"
- **Line 7:** "Or being"
- **Line 9:** "If you can"
- **Line 10:** "If you can"
- **Line 11:** "If you can"
- **Line 13:** "If you can"
- **Line 17:** "If you can"
- **Line 18:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "And"
- **Line 21:** "If you can"
- **Line 23:** "And"
- **Line 25:** "If you can"
- **Line 27:** "If"
- **Line 28:** "If"
- **Line 29:** "If you can"

POLYPTOTON

Polyptoton draws attention to the stable, composed moral path this poem champions.

For example, take a look at the way the speaker uses polyptoton in lines 5-7:

> If you can **wait** and not be tired by **waiting**,
> Or being **lied** about, don't deal in **lies**,
> Or being **hated** don't give way to **hating**,

Each time the speaker repeats a word in this section, it appears in a slightly different form, giving the line a sense of progression and development that reflects the poem's theme of moral growth. And each of these moments of polyptoton also reinforces the speaker's belief in moderation and restraint, as the speaker insists that:

- the son should learn to "**wait**" but not let the act of "**waiting**" overwhelm him;
- the son shouldn't "**lie**[]" even when he himself has been "**lied** about";
- the son shouldn't "give way to **hating**" even when other people "**hate**[]" him.

Using polyptoton in this way helps the speaker emphasize the idea that the son should always act with dignity and integrity,

never stooping to the level of his detractors. Just because other people might treat him a certain way, the poem implies, doesn't mean he should treat them the same. Polyptoton therefore spotlights the kind of balance and composure the speaker wants his son to develop.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "doubt"
- **Line 4:** "doubting"
- **Line 5:** "wait," "waiting"
- **Line 6:** "lied," "lies"
- **Line 7:** "hated," "hating"
- **Line 10:** "think," "thoughts"
- **Line 19:** "lose"
- **Line 20:** "loss"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help the speaker give the son advice in more vivid terms. A good example of this comes when the speaker advises his son to rebuild what he has lost if he ever finds his life in shambles:

> Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
> And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

This metaphor presents achievement as something breakable, a structure one slowly builds that can fall down as fast as a shack in a hurricane. When such ruination comes, the speaker suggests, his son should simply get down to work and "build" up everything he lost again.

The son should do this, the speaker says, with his "worn-out tools"—another metaphor, this one suggesting that the tried-and-true skills the son has acquired in life should be enough to help him rebuild. The overall message, then, is that the son shouldn't lose hope or motivation even after encountering hardship, and doesn't need any special luck or powers in order to recoup his losses after a setback: just those same down-to-earth life skills this poem advises him to learn.

Later, the speaker tells his son not to complain if he ever loses his money in a gambling game known as "pitch-and-toss"—here, a metaphor for taking any kind of big risk, which is often imagined as a "gamble." This once again highlights the idea of taking responsibility in the face of misfortune, though in this metaphor there's an extra dimension: the son brought the misfortune upon *himself* by taking a bold risk. Thus, he should take responsibility for his actions by showing composure and poise as he tries to remedy the situation.

In the final stanza, the speaker tells the son to "fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds worth of distance run." This metaphor means the son should be the kind of person who jumps at any opportunity to make progress and improve himself. Time ticks away "unforgiving[ly]," the speaker suggests, and those who use their fleeting seconds to metaphorically go the "distance" are those who can lay claim to real manhood.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken / Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken, / And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;"
- **Lines 17-20:** "If you can make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss, / And lose, and start again at your beginnings / And never breathe a word about your loss:"
- **Lines 21-24:** "If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew / To serve your turn long after they are gone, / And so hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!""
- **Line 26:** " Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,"
- **Lines 29-30:** "If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps the speaker bring abstract ideas to life. For instance, the speaker personifies "Triumph and Disaster" in lines 11 and 12 as a way of warning the son about not letting either success or misfortune get to him:

> If you can meet Triumph and Disaster
> And treat those two impostors just the same:

By referring to "Triumph and Disaster" as "impostors," the speaker talks about them as if they're people capable of tricking the son and overriding his good sense. This suggests that people often allow success and failure to influence them more than they should. Instead of taking "Triumph and Disaster" seriously, the speaker implies, people ought to approach them skeptically, understanding that they're both transient—though, like sneaky con artists, they'll try to persuade people to trust in them.

The speaker also personifies the human will when he tells his son to "hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says[...]: 'Hold on!'" This presents the will as a conscious force that can urge people onward even when they have nothing left in them. The personification here breathes life into the idea of determination, framing it as an active and encouraging spirit—one that people like the son can turn to for guidance and strength.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same:"
- **Lines 23-24:** "And so hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!""
- **Line 29:** "the unforgiving minute"

CONSONANCE

Consonance supports the strength and richness of this poem's language, and evokes both the speaker's unwavering moral conviction and his affection for the son he's advising.

Lines 25-26 provide one good example:

> If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
> Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,

Here, sharp, prominent /k/ and /r/ sounds make the speaker's advice to his son sound firm and authoritative. Those /k/ sounds repeat across the poem, and their stern crack makes the language here feel like a wake-up call.

But elsewhere, the speaker mixes in some softer consonant sounds:

> If you can fill the unforgiving minute
> With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,

Here, /f/ consonance and /s/ sibilance feel much gentler than the /k/ sound, tempering the speaker's sternness with sounds that evoke not just his firm moral conviction, but his care for his son.

Making the speaker's tone sound stern and unrelenting in some moments and soft and pleasant in others, this poem's consonance perhaps reflects the fact that, although the speaker has very high standards, he's only passing along this advice because he cares about his son.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "can keep," "all"
- **Line 2:** "losing," "blaming"
- **Line 3:** "trust yourself," "all," "doubt," "you"
- **Line 4:** "doubting too"
- **Line 6:** "being," "lied," "about," "don't deal"
- **Line 7:** "hated don't," "to hating"
- **Line 8:** "look," "talk," "too"
- **Line 9:** "can," "make," "dreams your master"
- **Line 10:** "can," "think," "make," "thoughts," "aim"
- **Line 11:** "meet," "Triumph," "Disaster"
- **Line 12:** "treat," "two impostors just," "same"
- **Line 13:** "can," "bear," "hear," "truth," "spoken"
- **Line 14:** "trap," "for fools"
- **Line 15:** "Or," "your," "broken"
- **Line 16:** "build," "with worn," "tools"
- **Line 17:** "can make," "one," "winnings"
- **Line 18:** "risk," "it," "turn," "pitch," "toss"
- **Line 19:** "and," "again," "beginnings"
- **Line 20:** "never breathe," "word," "your"
- **Line 21:** "force your heart," "nerve," "sinew"
- **Line 22:** "serve," "your turn," "after," "are"
- **Line 23:** "And," "on when," "nothing in"
- **Line 24:** "Except," "Will which," "says," "Hold"
- **Line 25:** "can talk," "crowds," "keep," "your virtue"
- **Line 26:** "Or," "walk with," "Kings," "nor," "common"
- **Line 27:** "foes," "friends"
- **Line 28:** "men count"
- **Line 29:** "If," "fill," "unforgiving," "minute"
- **Line 30:** "With," "sixty seconds'," "worth," "distance," "run"
- **Line 31:** "Yours," "Earth," "everything"
- **Line 32:** "more," "Man, my"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives a pleasingly musical quality to the speaker's language.

For example, the /oo/ and /ay/ sounds in lines 13 and 14 make the speaker's words sound sing-songy and melodic:

> If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
> Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools

The phrase "truth you've spoken" is particularly satisfying because the same /oo/ sound appears twice in quick succession. The /ay/ sound in the next line also jumps out at readers, pulling them through the line by creating an internal slant rhyme between "knaves" and "make." These moments make the language memorable—a useful effect in a poem full of advice the speaker wants his readers (and especially his son) to remember.

But the speaker uses assonance pretty sparingly and subtly. There are many lines that don't contain any assonance at all, meaning that when it *does* occur, it's all the more noticeable. And where assonance does appear, it's often subtle—like when the speaker uses the /i/ sound in line 18:

> And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

The /i/ here is a quick, passing sound, but it adds rhythm and texture to the language, especially in the phrase "risk it."

This poem uses assonance in an understated but meaningful way to add emphasis or simple musicality to the speaker's words.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you"
- **Line 2:** "losing"
- **Line 3:** "doubt"
- **Line 4:** "allowance"
- **Line 7:** "way," "hating"
- **Line 10:** "make," "aim"
- **Line 13:** "truth you've"
- **Line 14:** "knaves," "make"
- **Line 15:** "you," "gave," "to"
- **Line 16:** "stoop," "tools"
- **Line 18:** "risk it," "pitch"
- **Line 20:** "word"
- **Line 21:** "nerve"
- **Line 22:** "serve," "turn"
- **Line 25:** "talk"
- **Line 26:** "walk"
- **Line 29:** "unforgiving minute"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker uses juxtaposition to urge his son to take the moral high ground when he encounters bad behavior, comparing two different ways of moving through the world: a bad way and a good way.

For example, consider lines 6 and 7:

> Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
> Or being hated don't give way to hating,

The implication here (underlined by the polyptoton of "lied"/"lies" and "hated"/"hating") is that there are many people in the world who lie and hate, but the son should have the integrity to resist doing this—even when other people subject *him* to their lies or hatred.

In fact, the poem begins with a similar message, as the speaker tells the son to "keep [his] head" even when everyone around him is "losing theirs." This suggestion underlines the importance of maintaining one's composure: the speaker clearly believes that it's admirable for a person to remain unflappable even when everyone else is doing the exact opposite.

The juxtaposition in "If—" thus draws a contrast between how many people behave and how the speaker hopes his son will behave. By contrasting respectable behavior with foolish or impulsive behavior, the speaker shows his son not only what he hopes he'll become, but also what he hopes he *won't* become.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs"
- **Line 6:** " Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,"
- **Line 7:** "Or being hated don't give way to hating,"
- **Line 25:** "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,"
- **Line 26:** " Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,"

VOCABULARY

Allowance (Line 4) - To make "allowance" for something is to give it room. The speaker's point is that the son should leave room for other people to doubt him.

Talk Too Wise (Line 8) - The speaker means to say that the son shouldn't speak or act like he's smarter than everyone else.

Aim (Line 10) - Goal. The speaker tells the son not to get so caught up in thinking that he forgets to act.

Triumph (Line 11) - Success, victory.

Impostors (Line 12) - People who pretend to be someone they're not. The idea here is that the son shouldn't let himself take either success or misfortune too seriously, because both are deceptive.

Knaves (Line 14) - Dishonest, unscrupulous people.

Heap (Line 17) - Pile.

Pitch-and-Toss (Line 18) - An old gambling game that involves throwing coins.

Sinew (Line 21) - The tissues and tendons connecting muscles to bones—often used as an image of strength or endurance.

Virtue (Line 25) - High moral standards.

The Common Touch (Line 26) - The ability to get along with ordinary people.

Foes (Line 27) - Enemies.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"If—" is made up of 32 lines evenly divided into four octaves, or eight-line stanzas. This measured, balanced structure reflects the speaker's strict belief in the value of a measured, balanced life.

In spite of being 32 lines long, this poem is a single continuous sentence! The speaker uses distinctive anaphora to join up this sentence's many clauses, starting thought after thought with the words "If you can." Take, for example, lines 1 through 6:

> If you can keep your head when all about you
> And losing theirs and blaming it on you;

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,

These repetitions support the poem's steady, gradual build. Instead of immediately saying what will happen "if" the son follows his advice, the speaker just adds more "if"s, building a suspenseful pile of parallel sentences. He waits until the poem's last lines for the payoff: following all these suggestions, he concludes with a flourish, will give his son "the Earth and everything that's in it"—and make his son a "Man."

METER

"If—" is written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line contains five iambs, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). For example, line 2 looks like this:

Are los- | ing theirs | and blam- | ing it | on you;

Iambic pentameter gives the poem a bouncy da-DUM da-DUM rhythm that makes its speaker sound lively and vigorous. But it also gives the poem a little gravitas through its strong association with great writers like Shakespeare and Milton—associations which suggest the speaker takes the advice he's giving here very seriously.

A few lines in "If—" play with meter for effect. Take, for instance, line 31:

Yours is | the Earth | and ev- | erything | that's in it,

Instead of an iamb, the speaker begins the line with a trochee, or a foot with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: "Yours is." This emphasizes the word "yours," spotlighting the speaker's use of apostrophe as he addresses his son. The line also uses a feminine ending, meaning that its last iamb has an extra unstressed syllable tacked on. That extra syllable gives this line a little boost of momentum, carrying readers briskly on to the poem's stirring conclusion.

RHYME SCHEME

"If—" follows a simple alternating rhyme scheme:

ABABCDCD

Although the speaker's advice is stern, this easy, singsongy rhyme scheme feels appealing, friendly, and musical—an effect that communicates the affection the speaker has for his son. After all, he's giving his son all this advice because he wants him to lead a meaningful, worthwhile life.

Throughout the poem, the speaker alternates feminine endings and masculine endings—that is, lines that end with an extra unstressed syllable and lines that don't. (See the Meter section for a little more on that.) In the first three lines, the speaker uses the feminine endings of the rhymes "about you" and "doubt you" to line up three instances of the word "you" in a row. This repetition calls attention to his use of apostrophe. By starting with those three "you"s, the speaker seems to be trying hard to get the attention of the person he's addressing here—and since readers don't yet know that the poem's real addressee is the speaker's son, these insistent rhymes might well make them sit up a little straighter in their seats, asking, "Me?"

SPEAKER

"If—" never directly reveals its speaker's identity, but many people read the poem as if it's addressed to Rudyard Kipling's son, John. This, of course, would mean that the speaker is Kipling himself—an interpretation that makes quite a bit of sense, since most of the advice in "If—" sounds exactly like the sort of thing the (very British) Kipling himself would believe.

Regardless of whether the speaker is Kipling himself, it's reasonable to assume that the speaker is a father, since the poem is addressed to a son and gives paternal-sounding advice on manhood. More specifically, the speaker is a father who wants his son to move through life with restraint, confidence, and a strong work ethic, believing that these traits lead to a worthwhile and successful life.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a particular setting, since it's made up of advice that the speaker wants to give his son. This gives the poem a universal feeling: rather than grounding his poem in a specific place and time, the speaker talks broadly about the qualities that lead to a successful life. In his eyes, this poem might be directed to any young man in any time and place.

However, it's clear that the poem comes out of a male-dominated society that values a strong work ethic, self-restraint, and other stereotypically British values. Because the poem is often seen as a celebration of Stoic ideals, it makes sense to read it as a product of the "stiff upper lip" mentality that was popular in Britain around the turn of the 20th century (and is still very much part of the country's national identity).

Perhaps there's even the suggestion that the young man the speaker advises here will grow up to be a pillar of the British Empire. Kipling was a full-throated imperialist, and paternalistically believed the British had a responsibility to guide and shape the "less civilized" countries they colonized, guiding their citizens toward just the kinds of ideals he expresses here.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Rudyard Kipling was one of the most popular British writers of the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods—that is, the turn of the 20th century. He published "If—" in his 1910 book *Rewards and Fairies*, a work that demonstrated his mastery of both prose and verse. Kipling had already published both poetry collections and popular children's books (like *The Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories*); *Rewards and Fairies*, which alternated between historical fiction and poetry, melded his interests, combining his poetic talents with his knack for storytelling.

With its endorsement of self-restraint and poise in even the most trying circumstances, "If—" is a perfect example of how British literature has championed the principles of Stoicism, an Ancient Greek philosophy that taught indifference in the face of hardship. The general idea of Stoicism is that people shouldn't let extreme emotions affect the way they move through life, regardless of whether those emotions are negative *or* positive. Even Shakespeare toyed with this idea in his play *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet says, "[T]here is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"—implying that it's possible to use intentional, diligent thought to alter one's perspective on life.

These Stoic ideals worked their way into a mindset that is now associated with the British national character. Writers like Kipling helped cement this stereotypically British outlook, which is sometimes called the "stiff upper lip"—a term used to describe British integrity, endurance, and composure.

This sentiment became particularly popular in the Victorian era, as evidenced by poems like William Ernest Henley's "Invictus," which was published in 1888 and ends with the lines: "I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul." Kipling's "If—" is very much in keeping with this worldview, playing on the idea that respectable people (or, in male-centric turn-of-the-century Britain, respectable *men*) should have the kind of integrity and diligence that puts them in charge of their own destinies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In an interview he gave after the publication of "If—," Kipling said the poem was inspired by a man named Leander Starr Jameson, who led what's known as the Jameson Raid. This 1895 military campaign was a failed attempt to incite a British rebellion in South Africa. The fact that this raid was unsuccessful might make one wonder why, exactly, Kipling had Jameson in mind while writing a poem about what it means to be an upstanding, respectable man. But Jameson's failure is actually a perfect illustration of the speaker's belief in the importance of composure, confidence, and perseverance: after his failed raid, Jameson went on to a successful political career.

The poem was published in 1910, a period of relative peace in Britain. However, the British crown was still waging colonial wars abroad (much to the imperialist Kipling's approval). World War I was also only four years away, and the horrors of World War II and the Blitz (in which ruthless German bombing campaigns devastated cities across the UK) followed close on its heels. Given this national history, it's no surprise that "If—" remains one of the most popular poems in Britain to this day: it captures the country's commitment to ideals of self-possession, courage, and unswerving perseverance in the face of adversity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Hear a reading of "If—." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SfPf-_OavY)
- The Author's Life — Read more about Rudyard Kipling in this brief overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rudyard-kipling)
- Stoicism — For more information about the Stoic philosophy that informs this poem, check out this entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stoicism)
- The Stiff Upper Lip — "If—" is often associated with the stereotypical British "stiff upper lip"; read more about that expression and what it means here. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stiff_upper_lip)
- Kipling's Influence — Read an interesting essay about Kipling's influence in the United States and, more broadly, the lasting popularity of "If—." (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/rudyard-kipling-in-america)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER RUDYARD KIPLING POEMS

- The White Man's Burden

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