Black Sheep: Rudyard Kipling's Narcissistic Imperialism
by Diane Simmons I September 24, 2002

abstract

This paper interrogates the psychological underpinnings of the drive to "imperial" power, and the satisfactions of power that go beyond the material. To examine this question, I offer a case study of the life and works of Rudyard Kipling, who has been widely credited with creating the "defining images" of British Empire. I will read Kipling through such theorists as W.R.D. Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott and particularly Heinz Kohut, who has developed a modern theory of narcissism, as well as through the work of Erik Erikson, who has theorized a link between personal psychology and social and historical events and attitudes. Not only does an examination of Kipling’s work allow us to gain an understanding of the man who was in his later life Britain’s arch-imperialist, but it allows us insight into the public for whom his works so resonated.

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In the short story, "Ovando," West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid imagines the moment when European imperialists first arrive in the Caribbean. Kincaid’s narrator hears a knock and is surprised to see Frey Nicholas Ovando standing at her door. Though the fact is not spelled out in the surreal world of the story, Ovando, a 16th century governor of Hispaniola was notorious for his exceptionally cruel acts which destroyed the native population. In Kincaid’s account, the narrator’s first impression of Ovando is not of his strength but of “his suffering. Not a shred of flesh was left on his bones; he was a complete skeleton except for his brain which remained, and was growing smaller by the millennium. And he stank”(75). The narrator, in simple human hospitality, welcomes the visitor, even though it is clear that something is wrong with him. He is not alive in the normal way; he seems to have been stripped of the flesh and blood of humanity. Instead he is made of blood-stained armor. "He had fashioned himself a body from plates of steel, and it was stained with shades of red, blood in various stages of decay…"(76). Even at first encounter the narrator can see that Ovando is nothing but his own grandiosity, which camouflages an inner death.

This image is shocking, at odds with the picture of the European conqueror that has been formed in our minds after a lifetime of exposure to Western history and literature. These swashbuckling figures were cruel and greedy, yes, haughty and brutal. But we seldom imagine them as empty, as dead.

The testimony of Kincaid and other post-colonial writers to the ongoing effects of 19th century imperialism seems to require us to attempt to understand the psychological underpinnings of "imperial" power, and the satisfactions of power that go beyond the material. Do we dominate others out of strength or out of weakness, and is not an understanding of the forces that impel us to domination necessary for us to understand our actions in the past, present and future?

To examine this question, I will offer a case study of Rudyard Kipling, an extremely popular writer and one widely credited with conceptualizing British Empire for his vast reading public. I will read Kipling through theorists such as Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg and Alice Miller, who have developed the modern theory of narcissism, as well as the work of Erik Erikson, who has theorized a link between psychoanalytic thinking developed in work with individuals, and the consideration of social and historical events and attitudes. My study is based on the premise that one way to gain information on the mind of an age is to study its popular literature, mining it for patterns similar to those that emerge in analysis. Not only does an examination of Kipling’s work allow us to gain an understanding of the man who was in his later life Britain’s arch-imperialist, but it allows us insight into the public for whom his works so resonate.

There have been objections from many quarters to the use of psychoanalytic theory as a tool to help understand European imperialism. Marxists like Alme Cesaire have considered such examinations of imperialism to be a thinly disguised whitewash of atrocities; post-modernists consider psychoanalytic theory “reductive” unless wrapped in the enigmas of Lacan, while some schools of feminism object to an analysis which may blame upon maternal figures. But it is also the case that the language of psychoanalysis is frequently employed in discussing imperialism, though the theory behind the terms used is seldom explored. As Erik Erikson has written, writers most categorically opposed to systematic psychological interpretation permit themselves the most extensive psychologizing—which they can afford to believe is common sense only because they disclaim a defined psychological viewpoint(36) Accordingly, there is much reference, certainly in the fields of contemporary English and Cultural Studies, to the formation of the “subject,” to “anxiety,” or the split “id.” The relationship between colonizer and colonized has frequently, in recent years, been described as “narcissistic.” Abdul R. JanMohamed, for example, writes that the European colonizer by “subjugating the native… is able to compel the Other’s recognition of him. . . . This enforced recognition from the Other in fact amounts to the European’s narcissistic self recognition since the native, who is considered too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity, is cast as no more than a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him”(68). And Elleke Boehmer writes of the “white colonial id, the self manifested in the colonial drama” as an entity that is “split” and “weak… The European in the Empire rejects the native, yet he also requires the natives’ presence in order to experience to the full his own being as a white colonialist”(63).

I find the work of these writers valuable, and applaud their sense that these questions really must be considered to some extent in terms of the psyche. I, however, would like to move beyond what I think of as a somewhat metaphorical use of psychoanalytic terms, and suggest that psychoanalytic theory may be a more useful tool for us if we view these terms not as rather free-floating symbols for generally sensed psychological states, but as terms to name a complex, clinically examined set of relationships. I recognize that those of us without professional training in psychoanalytic theory can never use either the terms or the theories with precision, and are undoubtedly limited to oversimplification. Still, if we are to use these terms and concepts, I believe we must attempt to understand them as lay people. The term “narcissism,” especially, with its accompanying image of the self-gazing Narcissus, is perhaps too easy to take up and is frequently, as Christopher Lasch writes “draw[ed]” of its “clinical meaning” and “expand[ed]” to cover all forms of “vanity,” “self-admiration,” “self-satisfaction,” and “self-deification”(31). Far from being self-evident, the term narcissism is used quite differently by different theorists. The mythical Narcissus, whose problem is too much self-love, is not quite the Freudian narcissist, though this figure too suffers from too much self-involvement. Both are quite the opposite of the modern psychological underpinnings of “imperial” power, and the satisfactions of power that go beyond the material. Do we dominate others out of strength or out of weakness, and is not an understanding of the forces that impel us to domination necessary for us to understand our actions in the past, present and future?

The view of narcissism, as developed by Heinz Kohut, represents a radical revision of Freud’s view, and parallels the work of British object relations theorists W.R.D. Fairbairn, and D.W. Winnicott. For Fairbairn, infants are not pleasure seeking, in the Freudian sense, but object seeking, that is, their primary desire is not pleasure but connection with others. So important is this connection, Fairbairn believed, that “it is to disturbances in the object-relationships of the developing ego that we must look for the ultimate origin of all psychopathological conditions”(92) . D.W. Winnicott, who was a pediatrician before becoming a psychoanalyst, also viewed the connection with another as the infant’s main desire, and saw that a child’s sense of subjectivity, or inner reality, is nurtured by his connection with a responsive parent. When the mother responds to the baby by fulfilling his needs, Winnicott believed, she confirms in him the validity of his own wishes, allowing him to develop a sense of his inner self. If the mother does not respond in this way, according to Winnicott, the baby must prematurely concern himself with external forces, and the development of his own subjectivity can be arrested (594).

This focus on infant subjectivity is also found in the work of Kohut, who views primary narcissism, the infant sense that the world revolves around him—indeed,
at the beginning is—"as a normal and healthy condition, and one that the good parent supports. For Kohut, the infant moves from this primary narcissism to healthy self-hood as he matures, and, at the appropriate time, is forced to face the fact that the world does not revolve around him, that there are other needs and motivations to be taken into account than his own. If the collision of external reality with our own instincual demands is lovingly mediated by a caregiver, Kohut writes, the demands of the infant narcissist "become gradually integrated into the web of our ego as a healthy enjoyment of our own activities and successes and as an adaptively useful sense of disappointment tinged with anger and shame over our failures and shortcomings"(Kohut "Forms" 70).

For Kohut, too, then, the human infant is not necessarily driven by sexual and aggressive pressures; these are secondary productions of disruption in the formation of the self. Rather the child seeks others, first to reflect his own perfection back to him, then to embody that perfection. Eventually, these narcissistic desires for perfection may be adapted in such a way that the infant's cathexis of self and others are gradually reduced to more or less realistic proportions as frustrations are gained within a supportive environment.

Fairbairn, Winnicott and Kohut all paint a hopeful picture of the development of the human self, a self that can manage to retain the sense that he, others, and life itself are good despite disappointments. Such a portrait, which features acceptance of self and others, would not seem to be a promising beginning for life as an imperialist or racist, whose "work" is to constantly demean and dehumanize others. But all children are not reared in the sort of supportive environment envisioned here, and the result can be narcissistic injury. When, Kohut writes, the parent or caregiver prematurely interferes with the narcissistic self, or when the narcissistic self has been "insufficiently modified because traumatic onslaughts to the child's self esteem have driven the grandiose fantasies into repression," then the adult ego will vacillate between "an irrational overestimation of the self and feelings of inferiority and will react with narcissistic mortification to the thwarting of its ambitions"(69).

A "mirror hungry" personality type may result from narcissistic injury, Kohut writes. Such individuals, as several theorists have shown, are desperate for others to "nourish their famished self" and who need to control others to assure the acclaim they must have. These people are "impelled to display themselves and to evoke the attention of others, trying to counteract, however fleetingly, their inner sense of worthlessness and lack of self esteem" (Kohut 190). Narcissists' needs are so great, according to Otto Kernberg, that they experience little empathy for the feelings of others. In general, he writes, "their relationships with other people are clearly exploitative and sometimes parasitic. It is as if they feel they have the right to control and possess others and to exploit them without guilt feelings—and behind a surface which very often is charming and engaging, one senses coldness and ruthlessness..."(214).

While there are varieties of response to narcissistic disturbance, Alice Miller writes, two forms are often seen, forms which Miller considers mirror opposites, grandiosity and depression: "Behind manifest grandiosity, depression is constantly lurking and hiding behind a depressive mood there are often unconscious...fantasies of grandiosity. In fact grandiosity is the defense against depression and depression is the defense against the real pain over the loss of the self"(328). The grandiose person, then, must constantly find those who can be made to admire and esteem him, is "constantly occupied body and soul with gaining this admiration"(329). The need is intense, for without it he is in danger of plunging into a depression which requires him to re-experience the loss of self. The narcissist is, thus, powerfully dependent upon those whose admiration and esteem he can compel, though he never feels that he really has enough for, as Miller writes, "admiration is not the same thing as love"(330.)

The portrait of narcissism, as drawn by Kohut and others gives us a model to help us think about what has often been described as the narcisistic relationship of imperialism and the racism that accompanies it. It is immediately apparent, I think, the uses to which subject peoples could be put by the narcissist as described above. Subject peoples could be compelled—with military force if necessary, through the dispensation or withholding of essential goods or personal freedom—by the imperialist. Subject peoples could simultaneously be treated or described with contempt, shamed, even sadistically punished in actuality or imagination, allowing the narcissistic colonizer to ward off his own feelings of shame and self-contempt. Further, and this is perhaps one of the great benefits of the colonial project for the narcissist, one could join with others, or lead others, with whom one shared the need to construct a grandiose self-image, thus making the condition seem quite normal. For, Kohut writes, "there are groups that are characterized by the fact that they are held together by this shared grandiose self—crudely stated, by their shared ambitions rather than their shared ideals." When "acceptable" outlets for prestige are blocked, Kohut writes, groups like individuals may react with the sort of aggression which takes on "overly and covertly, the flavor of narcissistic rage in either its acute or, even more ominously in its chronic form"(Thoughts 658).

In his work examining the link between individual psychology and social processes Erik Erikson wrote, "It frequently happens in history that an extreme and even atypical personal experience fits a universal latent conflict so well that a crisis lifts it to a representative position"(336). If we are to use a theory of narcissism to help us think about Eurocentric imperialism, we must be able to identify opinion leaders as suffering narcissistic disturbance, and we must see that the grandiosity, sense of loss, and vengeful rage they express resonates with society generally. While the present study focuses only on Rudyard Kipling, it is worth noting Ronald Hymans's claim, in discussing men such as Cecil Rhodes, David Livingstone and Henry Stanley, Lord Kitchener and Field Marshal Montgomery, that "the rulers of empire as a group display a high degree of emotional deprivation...it is possible to see a basic truth in the contention that "love's loss was empire's gain""(49). In individuals in leadership roles, then, we must look for an experience of failed nurture, and also for the predictable form of personality grandiosity and emptiness, loss and fear. Further, we must see this disturbance affecting individuals' actions or views. To examine the connection between a failure of nurture, and imperial narcissism, we now turn to an examination of the literary works of such an opinion leader, to the man credited perhaps more than any other with creating imperialism for mass consumption, the coiners of the phrase "white man's burden," the immensely popular author, Rudyard Kipling.

Beginning with his books of short stories set in India,Plain Tales from the Hills in 1888, Kipling's importance to the colonial project was immense and he has been widely viewed as creator of the late 19th century idea of empire. He was, Elleke Boehmer writes, a "maker of defining images...His characterizations of colonial life became the medium through which the British viewed their work not only in India, Burma, and Ceylon, but in Africa also"(53). Cecil Rhodes, who was Kipling's close friend and benefactor, praised Kipling for showing the world the strength of British Empire (Angus Wilson 224). And the editor of the conservative Morning Post, H.T. Gwynne, wrote that Kipling "contributed more than anyone, perhaps, toward the consolidation of British Empire"(Oid in Angus Wilson 215).

What can we learn about this man who played such a major role in conceptualizing empire for the British public at home and abroad? How, precisely, did he portray empire? Why did Kipling's particular portrayal of empire have such an immense appeal to the British public? And what does an examination of this image, and the personal psychology behind it, suggest about the psychological basis of imperialism?

There are many accounts of a particular sort of failed childhood nurture during this period, of children whose parents were virtual strangers to them, or who subscribed to the Puritan idea that children should have their inherent evil beaten out of them. There are also many accounts of nurses and tutors who came and went, sometimes kind, sometimes harsh, always responsible more for the externals of a child's life than for his inner balance. And if middle and upper-class British parents were allowed to rear their own children, poor children were—if they were boys—usually raised from the age of six by neither parents nor by servants but were brought up in effect by other children at a boarding school, where under a much valued system of "self governance" older boys were free to tyrannize and even "enslave" their juniors until the younger boys could take their turn at tyrannizing others. For little boys, yet to be formed by the self-governance system, the trauma could be intense. Suicide and death was not infrequent: "Children torn away from mothers and sisters [at the age of six] not infrequently die," Thomas de Quincey wrote. "The complaint is not entered by the registrar as grief; but that it is. Grief of that sort, and at that age, has killed more than ever have been counted amongst its martyrs"(147).

Rudyard Kipling's case follows this pattern of distant parents, and changing cast of servants who were by turns indulgent and sadistic, and a school life based upon survival of the fittest. As set out in the story "Baa, Baa, Blacksheep," as confirmed in Kipling's autobiography, Something of Myself, as verified by his sister Trix, and as portrayed in fictional form in The Light That Failed, Kipling, from the age of five to eleven, was subjected to psychic and even physical torture, as a paid caregiver devoted herself to stripping him of every shred of comfort, pleasure or self-respect.

To understand the trauma the young Kipling experienced during this time, we must first look at his life from birth to five years, when his situation seems to have been designed to support and perhaps even prolong primary narcissism. Born in India, he was cared for by servants, and taken everywhere by them in a world that seems, in his memory, to be full of beauty, light and benevolence. His first impression, he writes, in Something of Myself, is of "daybreak, light and colour and golden and purple fruits at the level of my shoulder. This would be the memory of early morning walks to the Bombay fruit market with my ayah...Meeta, my Hindu bearer, would sometimes go into little Hindu temples where, being below the age of caste, I held his hand and looked at the dimly seen, friendly Gods"(1).

"Sujata", the ayah, proved to be a kind and indulgent caregiver, and Kipling attributed his desire to write in part to his fond memories of her. "'Meeta', I love you more than my own mother, and you shall have the food that I eat," he wrote. "And when you die, I will make a story of you."

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If the world, as presented by the child's servants, is full of light and beauty, the servants themselves, as shown in Kipling's memoir, feed the infant sense that all exists for his pleasure. He was, he says in his memoir, "the unquestioned despot of... Bombay"(93). When in the autobiographical story "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," Kipling's little protagonist Punch commands his ayah to keep telling stories, even though it is bedtime, and even though more stories will make his little sister, she obeys. Parents are not always so easy to command, but in Kipling's case these do not seem to have been much present. Though the mother is remembered singing at the piano before going out to dinner; and the father, who was a professor of architecture at an industrial design school in Bombay, for drawing funny pictures, they did not spend enough time with the child for him to view English as his first language. In his memoir, Kipling recounts being dressed and taken in to the dining room to see his parents, of being admonished to "Speak English to Papa and Mamma," and of struggling to translate "out of the vernacular idiom that one thought and dreamed in"(4). In "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," it is his ayah who first hints that he is going away to England, and she who expresses sadness at his departure (88).

It was customary to return Anglo-Indian children to England once infancy was passed, and Kipling's parents were only complying with this practice; when they returned the five-year-old Kipling and his three-year-old sister to be raised in England. The parents slipped away in the night and the children awoke to find themselves in the care of a strange woman, "Auntie Rosa," hired through a newspaper advertisement. If Kipling's early caregivers appear to have fed the child's infant grandiosity and to have done little to help him modify narcissistic desires, Auntie Rosa, a woman whose apparent sadness was buoyed by her sense of Christian righteousness, seems to have taken it as her task to destroy every fragment of self-esteem in the boy from India, to make his life, Kipling wrote, one of "punishment and humiliation--above all humiliation"(Something 6). When the boy in "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" tries to escape into books, he is forbidden to read. His little sister, whom Punch is encouraged to speak to him because he is "bad," a "black sheep," he is constantly scolded and snubbed by the woman and her son, interrogated and hounded into minor inconsistencies, then punished anew as a liar, sent to school with the sign, "liar" sewn to the back of his jacket. He suffers so much that he thinks of ways to die. When the boy in "Baa Baa, Black Sheep" is told that sucking paint can kill you, he promptly goes to the nursery and sucks the paint off all the animals in a toy Noah's arc. The children, as recounted both by Kipling, and his sister Trix, who in later years shared a series of psychological breakdowns, had no idea why they had been deposited in this house, the only explanation given by "Auntie Rosa" being that they were too much trouble for their parents. The children were unable to understand, his sister would later remember, "why our parents had deserted us. We had no preparation or explanation; it was like a double death, or rather, like an avalanche that had swept away everything happy and familiar"(Qtd. in Edmund Wilson 88).

Though there were well-to-do relatives nearby in England, none seem to have detected any problem and though Rudyard visited them occasionally, he did not complain of his situation. Later in his life he explained why: "Badly treated children," he wrote, "have a clear notion of what they are likely to get if they betray the secrets of a prison house before they are clear of it"(Something 11). Finally a visitor seemed to have grasped that there was something wrong and contacted their mother who returned from India. When, returning, she bent over her son, he flinched, expecting to be hit. In "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" his mother is portrayed as loving and sympathetic, and the reunion joyful "as if she had never gone." Once again the child feels that he is loved. Still, Kipling's young protagonist notes, "when young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the Love in the World will not wholly take away that knowledge. . . ."(110).

Kipling, then, appears to be a man who has suffered an early, immense psychological trauma and who seems not to have had--not in India; certainly not in England--the necessary assistance in mediating infant narcissism into a healthy relationship with the outer world. Thus begins the career of the man whose vision of the British Imperial role will resonate more powerfully than any other with the English public. Kipling was next sent to a boarding school for the children of colonials which, as the portrait he will later paint in the novelStalky and Co. suggests, had the usual amount of bullying and degradation reported at such institutions and where, Edmund Wilson suggests, the "fear and hatred" of life at Auntie Rosa's is revived by the brutal disciplinary system. For Kipling, however, school appears to have been an improvement over Auntie Rosa's in that he had companions, and the schoolboy threesome portrayed in Stalky and Co. who band together for protection and comfort in a hostile world, bears a distinct resemblance to the "soldiers three" of his later stories of imperial India. Then at sixteen Kipling went back to India, where his parents had found him a position on a small English language newspaper. For the next seven years he worked as a journalist, doing the many tasks required of one at small publications, writing much of the copy, including dozens of short stories, which appeared in the paper, and would later be collected as Plain Tales from the Hills and Soldiers Three, first published in 1888 and in 1890, bringing Kipling to the attention of the reading public.

These early works, written hastily for newspaper deadlines by a very young man who in no way sees himself as a spokesman for Empire, are strikingly different from Kipling's later work. In these first stories, we see Kipling reading empire through the lens of his own experience, which has been that of both himself and other young people left to fend for themselves and to contend with authority figures who are appear to display a combination of cruelty, hypocrisy and callous disregard in conditions that verge upon the desperate. Several clear and related themes emerge from these stories. Plain Tales, set in a British hill station to which officers and their families retire from the heat of the plains, is full of mildly comic accounts of hapless, often foolish young men, men who do not have much of an idea what they're doing in India, whose sense of how social and romantic affairs should be managed has broken down in the odd new environment, who must be themselves managed by usually older and more mature women. Also in these stories, however, and dominating Soldiers Three, is the underside of this comic rendering of post-adolescent male cluelessness, the portrait of young men driven nearly mad by boredom, confusion and futility.

Young British men in India are shown to be at the mercy of pompous or evil superiors; their sole salvation is in the loyalty of comrades in suffering. The three soldiers of the second book's title must talk each other out of suicide, get each other out of scrapes, listen to each others' laments of lost love and home, carry each other off to some secret spot where they can smoke and talk undisturbed. Both types of story seem to portray the young men who theoretically do the work of Empire as little more than lost boys, needing their mothers, or, failing that, trying to get by with the help of friends.

It must be noted that in none of the stories in these volumes--absolutely--none is the slightest sense that the English are serving any noble or even useful purpose by their presence in India. Indeed, in the story "Thrown Away," Kipling shows a young man who tries to take his duties seriously, and is driven to suicide as a result, not understanding that "India is a place beyond all others where one must not take things too seriously..." Good work does not matter, because a man is judged by his worst output, and another man takes all the credit of his best as a rule. Bad work does not matter, because other men do worse hanging on long in India than anywhere else... the wisest thing is to escape as soon as ever you can to some place where amusement is amusement and a reputation worth having"(43).

In much popular colonial writing, a great deal of effort is taken to show that any failure of moral and morale among the English in India is finally India's fault, the fault of a "soft" British character who has become corrupted and venal even in the 'nature' of India"(Castle 17). This is the message, for example, of another popular writer of the era, Arthur Conan Doyle, with his Sherlock Holmes mysteries frequently turn on the problem of returning Englishmen, tainted by their experiences in India, Africa or South America. But here Kipling shows no such thing. Rather it is the senselessness and corruption of the British project itself and his own role in it which causes Kipling's young protagonist to kill himself, an act which must be covered up, since, Kipling shows, those back in England can't be allowed to glimpse the reality behind the facade of Empire, even though it is they who have sent the young man out. It was, those who find the body agree, "utterly impossible to let the letter [the young man has written, describing his sufferings] go Home"(47). In a remarkable cameo of the hypocrisy which those in India are required to accept, the officer who finds the body agrees, "utterly impossible to let the letter [the young man has written, describing his sufferings] go Home"(47). In a remarkable cameo of the hypocrisy which those in India are required to accept, the officer who finds the body agrees, "utterly impossible to let the letter [the young man has written, describing his sufferings] go Home"(47). In a remarkable cameo of the hypocrisy which those in India are required to accept, the officer who finds the body agrees, "utterly impossible to let the letter [the young man has written, describing his sufferings] go Home"(47). In a remarkable cameo of the hypocrisy which those in India are required to accept, the officer who finds the body agrees, "utterly impossible to let the letter [the young man has written, describing his sufferings] go Home"(47).
Kipling's portrait of the British in India, then, is not one of confident, righteous imperial power, but a scene of frightened and fundamentally helpless young males who find themselves in a world of terror and confusion, a world where there is no meaning behind the torment one must endure, a world in which if one survives it is only by killing off the trusting, hopeful, sensitive part of oneself. It is a world in which one yearns to be nurtured, usually mothered, but also one in which one's suffering must be hidden, even from those who might feel pity for one's plight.

There is a great deal of self-pity in both books, as well as a pronounced under-current of revenge fantasy, but the wish for revenge is controlled, and self-pity is quite different from the grandiosity alternating with depression and rage of the full-fledged narcissist. We do not yet see anything like the young English god and adoring, slavish natives that we will see later in Kipling's work, nor do we yet see the full unleashing of a "nurthless" narcissistic rage. Rather as he repeatedly constructs these portraits of lost young men, Kipling resembles patients described by Alice Miller, people who instinctively, often unconsciously work to heal themselves, and are in this attempt compelled to replay their experiences of loss as they struggle to understand the source of their depression or feelings of emptiness. Indeed, in all these works, with "Baa Baa Black sheep" only the most personal _expression of the grief of loss, it is possible to read Kipling as on the road to health. For, Miller writes, "only mourning for what he has missed, missed at the crucial time (italics hers) can lead to real healing"(Drama 43.)

What do these works contribute to the understanding of the roots of imperialism? As I've suggested, these stories are curious first works for the man who is universally seen as the poet of Imperial jingoism. Here the work of Britain in India can't be mistaken for a glorious undertaking, but is rather a muddle of scared boys and pompous officials, all barely hanging on against the great unalterable complexity of India. If Kipling had stopped here, I wonder how we would view him today, whether Cecil Rhodes would still have seen Kipling as a pillar of empire, whether we might see him not as a leading jingoist and apologist for empire, but as one who shone a light upon its hypocrisy. As Charles Dickens' early experience of being put to work in a boot blacking plant allowed him to see the misery of the poor in London with an intensity that many other writers did not, Kipling's early experience of the hypocrisy at the heart of unquestioned authority appears to have allowed him to grasp the a truth at the heart of the Imperial experience. And while one may find many examples of knee-jerk racial stereotyping. Kipling is capable, in these works, of showing how natives as well as the young English men are harmed by the senseless wielding of imperial power.

But Kipling's work is not completed here, and as we read forward we can trace the trajectory from the hurt child, still struggling to understand his experience, to the full-fledged narcissist, no longer able to grapple honestly with his own loss, but fluctuating between grandiosity on one hand, and a sense of emptiness and narcissistic rage on the other.

After publication of _Plain Tales and Soldiers Three_, the twenty-four-year-old Kipling returned to London, where he was immensely lionized and immensely depressed. Despite "instant literary success," he soon felt "increasingly uncertain about his position in England and his status as an 'English' writer"(Ricketts 152). Temporarily broke, despite his success, he lived in squalid rooms, and tried but failed to renew a romance with a young woman for whom he has been carrying the torch in India. "London," he wrote during this period is a "vile Place" and he appeared to suffer some sort of psychological breakdown, writing to a friend, "I have broken up. My head has given out and I am forbidden work and I am to go away somewhere... I must go on alone till the end of my time. I can do nothing to save myself from breaking up now and again"(Ricketts 156).

Kipling's very success may have contributed to his depressions and break-down. The narcissist, Miller has written, must continually deliver "brilliant performances to ward off feelings of loss"(Miller "Depression" 332). It was during this period that Kipling wrote the novel, _The Light That Failed_, with its portrait of a deeply depressed young man who resembles Kipling in many ways. Like Kipling, the book's hero, Dick, has spent his youth in a brutal foster home which has left him "savage in soul"(9). Like Kipling, Dick, has become a publishing sensation as his drawings of scenes in the Near East have "caught on" with the newspaper reading public. But the acclaim Dick faces when he returns to England is experienced as a sort of assault, as for the narcissistically damaged person, Miller writes, great success is often followed by "a sense of emptiness and futility, even of shame and anger" if that success is "above all, a substitute satisfaction of old needs for echoing, mirroring, and being seen and understood"(Drama 43).

Rather than basking in acclaim, Dick feels robbed and unappreciated; his publishers are determined to exploit him, and that his fans do not care about him as an artist, only wanting more exotic portraits to titillate them as they sit cozily with their newspapers and their cups of tea. In response, Dick expresses his contempt for the England to which he has returned, to feel that it is not his home, and to see his countrymen's interest in Empire as part of the "blind, brutal British public's bestial thirst for blood"(498). He yearns to leave England, and in the following passage we see a fantasy of escape to a setting that sounds much like the Bombay of Kipling's childhood, a place where "you can hear the fat coconuts falling from the palms; and you order an ivory-white servant to sling you a long yellow hammock with tassels on it like ripe maize, and you put up your feet and hear the bees hum and the water fall till you go to sleep"(77). Once again, those in power in Britain, indeed the British public itself, are shown to be hypocritical, cruel, and driven by lusts which cause them to destroy earnest and sensitive young people. Placed against this is a gentle fantasy land, and a yearning to sink back into magical infancy, to be gently rocked to sleep.

As the infant Mohammed Din dies following the destruction of his little world by careless authority, Dick, who has been destroyed by the thoughtless British public, must also die. An old wound, received when he was illustrating a battle in the Sudan, leads to blindness. One reading of this blindness, which is, of course, reflected in the book's title, is that it represents the loss of the child's world of light and joy, especially when we remember Kipling's portrayal of the light of India. It is probably also significant that Kipling lost his much of his own eyesight as a child at Auntie Rosa's house where he was, for a time, functionally blind until his mother returned and got him eye glasses. Like Kipling, Dick is also rejected by the woman whose love might have saved him and rather live on in loveless darkness, he makes his way back to the Sudan, there to re-join soldier friends, men who, like those in India, can only try to support one another in the midst of the maddening, meaningless mission upon which they have been sent. In the midst of the horror of battle, Dick imagines that he is back in his foster home, about to be punished. Then he dies in the arms of a comrade.

Once again, we cannot read Kipling as an apologist for or even a supporter of empire. Once again there is no hint that the British do something noble or useful when they go abroad. There is no word of the "peace and civilization which it was the glory of the British to introduce" to their subjects, as was claimed by a well-known school history for young people published the same year(Castle 12). Rather empire is a show for the British public which is willing to sacrifice its young men to have its appetite for violence vicariously satisfied. And while these young men cultivate an attitude of cool cynicism in the face of danger, they are not portrayed as heroes, fighting to bring civilization to the benighted. They are fundamentally passive, suffering figures, struggling to survive the position into which they have been thrust. If this were the last of Kipling's work, he would appear to be almost a protest writer, tearing the veil of hypocrisy from the imperial project.

But this is not, of course, the last to be heard of a man who wrote prolifically until his death in 1936. Nine years later, in 1899 Kipling would publish the poem, "The White Man's Burden," in which America is exhorted to sacrifice its young men for the benefit of its ungrateful—"new-caught sullen"—subjects in the Philippines. To a reader of the early work, the shift in Kipling's outlook comes as a shock. For now it is claimed quite clearly and apparently without irony that heroic and committed young Anglo-Saxon men are sacrificing themselves entirely for the benefit of those wild and helpless peoples whom they rule. The lines are well known:

_Take up the White Man's burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives need:
Go bind your sons to exile
Send forth the best ye breed
Take up the White Man's burden
Half devil and half-child._ (Gunga 52)
The poem was unanimously applauded, and firmly established Kipling as a poet of empire. As Ricketts writes, both liberals and imperialists found much to like.
in the poem, though Kipling in letters insists he has not meant to question Britain's imperial role: "Any other breed of white man, with such a weapon to their hand, would have been captivating the round Earth in their own interests long ago"(Qtd in Ricketts 237). Despite Kipling's disclaimers however, there is a subtext of anxiety and guilt in the poem, making it a surprising piece with which to celebrate a moment of national triumph, suggesting that under that triumph lay a rich vein of national insecurity.

In the next few years, as Kipling suffers a series of blows that replicate childhood trauma—the final loss of his American idyll, the death of a young daughter—and as Britain itself suffers a blow to its grandiose self image—the initial humiliating defeats of the British by the tiny Boer republics—Kipling's portrayal of empire shifts radically. No longer is empire portrayed as a place where young men passively suffer for no good cause. Now, as shown by the short story "A Sahib's War," empire is a place where godlike British soldiers are supported by adoring native sidekicks, and where sadistic punishment is envisioned being inflicted upon degraded foes, with the survival of civilization itself at stake.

The Boer War, a fight to take control of the Boer Republics of Transvaal and The Orange Free State, which lay north of the English Cape Colony at the tip of South Africa was popularly seen as a crusade to protect the English-speaking population which had flooded into the Transvaal upon the discovery of gold, from the rule of backward Afrikaners or Boers. Further, the imperative to unite South Africa in English hands was asserted to be necessary to maintain British standing in the world. Others, however, saw the conflict as representing “all that was reprehensible in British imperialism” fought against two weak and tiny republics, Cecil Rhodes, whose mining plans had not been supported by the leader of the Transvaal(Judd 156). But, if Kipling had earlier portrayed British Empire as a place where little of value was accomplished, and popular interest in empire as a “blind, bestial thirst for blood”(Light 48), his position now seems completely reversed; he traveled to South Africa where he became intimate with Rhodes—who gave the Kiplings a home on one of his estates; he put his newspaper skills to working out a propaganda sheet, with Kipling writing much of the copy, including a stronger version of "The White Man's Burden," called "A Song of the White Men." With this poem, Kipling's portrayal of empire takes another step. Gone now is the sense of the futility of empire, but also gone is the notion, found in "White Man's Burden," that the British are sacrificing themselves for the good of the natives they rule. Replacing this is a hard, ruthless vision of a struggle for survival:

Now, this is the faith that the White Men hold
When they build their homes afar--

"Freedom for ourselves and freedom for our sons
And, failing freedom, War."22

Heinz Kohut has described aggression in narcissistic individuals as exhibiting a "rage" which sets it off from other kinds of aggression, a type of rage which seems to be reflected in a story Kipling wrote at the time, "A Sahib's War." "Narcissistic rage," Kohut writes, "occurs in many forms; they all share, however, a specific psychological flavor which gives them a distinct position within the wide realm of human aggressions. The need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims"(Kohut "Thoughts" 637.). Often, Kohut writes, the narcissist was shame or ridiculed as a child, and in adulthood wards off his continuing vulnerability to shame by attempting to shame others in a sort of preventive attack. In "sadistic re-enactments" of his own mistreatment, he attacks others in a spirit of revenge, even though these have not played a part in the original injury. Such misplaced rage, Kohut writes, is marked by its "utter disregard for reasonable limitations and a boundless wish to redress injury and to obtain revenge." ("Thoughts" 640).

This particular "flavor" of rage is on display in "A Sahib's War." Here Kipling presents a grandiose portrait of an golden young English captain, whose perfection is expressed by the story's narrator, a Sikh fighter who has come to Southern Africa to serve his beloved master, whom the Sikh adores as he would a son. Through this narrator, and the account of the love the colonizer bear their British masters, Kipling suggests that the Boers have no good reason for fighting, but should love the English as does the Sikh. The Sikh is also used to display attitudes underlying the British role which may not be entirely seemly for the British themselves to express. The surrogate Sikh, for example, holds naked racist attitudes toward black Africans. And he also expresses a grandiose attitude toward empire, a sense of greatness that is dogged by a vision of emptiness and loss, that echoes the underlying uncertainty of "Song of White Men." As the Sikh puts it, "Ye cannot in one place rule and in another bear service. Either ye must everywhere rule or everywhere obey"(208).

Finally, Kipling uses the Sikh to express a sadistic hatred for those who would challenge—and, as the Boers have done, temporarily defeat—the British, a hatred that is not consistent with the attitudes expected of those bearing the white man's burden, but which is consistent with the sadistic rage of the narcissist as described by Kohut. A particular aspect of narcissistic rage, Kohut writes, is that of the opponent who has called forth the rage is not seen as separate from the narcissist's self, but as a "flaw in a narcissistically perceived reality." The enemy is seen as a "recalcitrant part of an expanded self over which the narcissistically vulnerable person had expected to exercise full control, and "the enemy is thus unable to see that the enemy, however wrong, is, in some sense like the narcissist himself, a person with particular goals and aims. Rather the fact that the other person is "independent or different is experienced as offensive by those with intense narcissistic needs"(644). In Kipling's story, then, the Boers are not seen as legitimate combatants or even as fully human, but as evil, bestial and despicable. The Boer is the most detestable of all. The Sikh sees the Boer as an affront to his master's greatness, and this is shown to be profoundly degenerate, the mother is a "fat woman with the eyes of a swine and the jowl of a swine" and her son is an idiot, "a tall young man deprived of understanding. His head was hairless, no larger than an orange, and the pit of his nostrils was eaten away by a disease. He laughed and slavered and sported spotly..."(214). Encountering these creatures, the Sikh veers into sadism. He enchains the woman whose "life and body" he claims, and she pleads for mercy falling "upon her knees and along the ground, and pawed [his] boots and howled"(217). He is preparing to hang her son, taking care to position a lamp so that "she might see well," when a ghost of the dead captain appears to stop the affair. The Boers, the Sikh reluctantly turns the affair over to some British soldiers who arrive at this point.

Perhaps the intensity of the anger seen here is a result of the fact that Kipling, though he has written much about warfare, is actually close to the front for the first time, and witnessing the filth and disease that particularly marked the Boer conflict. Perhaps it is a result of the threat the English face, suffering their first serious reverses in recent history at the hands of those they would colonize. Perhaps too it is due to the continued assaults upon Kipling's own self-esteem, the devoured nature of fame, as he seems to have experienced it, and the humiliation that resulted from his attempt to build a sanctuary in America. Certainly the desire for revenge and the sense of the vulnerability of young English men has always been present in Kipling's work, but the earlier stories do not even approach this level of violence, nor do they focus on external enemies. For the desire to torture and humiliate one's enemy is intense here, as is the fearful sense that all that is beloved, good and fine is horribly vulnerable and can be wiped out in a moment. This, as Kohut has shown, is the inner world of the narcissist, a vacillation between grandiose fantasies of perfection, and an underside of loss, fear and rage. This story, with its desire for violent and sadistic revenge, strikes a new chord in that the enemies of the English are presented in such bestial terms, and that these desires are expressed so directly, even if these wishes are displaced onto a non-English proxy whose grip upon the civilizing mission of the British is understandably imperfect.

In 1901, while the Boer War was still going on, Kipling published what would become his best-known and most popular novel Kim, and it is here, more in other work, that we see Kipling succumb completely to the grandiose fantasies that mark the victim of narcissistic disturbance... This grandiose fantasy is strikingly embodied in the person of Kim, the young English boy, orphaned in India. Though he is orphaned, he is by no means harmed—as the child Rudyard was so deeply harmed—by the disappearance of parents. Indeed Kim is the opposite of the miserable, helpless, friendless little boy that had been Rudyard Kipling. The young Kim is a masterful manipulator of people. He has the omniscience of a god, knows everything about his environment, and his powers are acknowledged and praised by all around him. He knows none of the loss or sadness of the boy in "Baa Baa, Black sheep," or little Mohammad Din. While Mowgli was an outcast everywhere, Kim is at home everywhere, known as "little Friend of All the World." He speaks several vernaculars, is savvy enough to understand all the shady schemes that are hatched in the bazaars, and at the same time has the spirituality to lead a holy man, a lama, on his quest for Enlightenment. A beauty, he is beloved of women, but unlike Kipling’s earlier young men in India—he has no need for a mother or woman in general and knows enough to avoid them. Plucky and tough, he is admired and respected, by the toughest of characters. In a primary narcissism heaven, Kim’s perfection is mirrored by all around him.

But Kim’s powers go beyond even this. For, even as he owns native life, he simultaneously has a highly successful career as a British spy. This however does not present a problem. His love for the lama, whom he guides toward enlightenment, feels real, and one waits for Kim to come up against the contradiction that...
he is using the holy man's quest to escape the evil of the world as a cover from which to spy for the British. But Kim--all things to all people, native and British alike—never recognizes this as a contradiction. As a full-fledged narcissist, he is parasitic, to use others without acknowledging or even recognizing what he is doing.

The only difficulty we ever see Kim face is during a time of illness. Momentarily deprived of the energy which allows him to perform his perfection before mirroring others, Kim plunges into symptoms of depression to which the narcissist is prone. For the narcissist, Miller writes, "depression, the feeling of emptiness and self-alienation" come to the fore whenever "the drug of grandiosity fails, as soon as they are not 'on top,' not definitely the 'superstar' or whenever they suddenly get the feeling they failed to live up to some ideal image and measure they feel they must adhere to"(6). Weakened by illness, his powers momentarily failing him, Kim's "soul was out of gear with its surroundings--a cog wheel unconnected with any machinery." The noises around him "hit on dead ears. Kim's attempts to recover show the instantaneous shifting between grandiosity and emptiness: 'I am Kim. I am Kim,' he repeats to himself. "And what is Kim?" His soul suddenly get the feeling they failed to live up to some ideal image and measure they feel they must adhere to"(254). Within a few lines, however, the old Kim is back, and Kipling hurriedly causes the lama to sing his perfection: "Never was such a chela. Temperate, kindly, wise, of ungrudging disposition, a merry heart upon the road, never forgetting, learned, truthful, courteous"(255).

The evidence shows that Rudyard Kipling struggled for a time to find the truth of his experience, to express the sense of young men used and abused by a hypocritical power, an experience familiar to many boys and men of the era who had attended boarding school or gone into military or colonial service. With his venture to America, he tried to satisfy the yearning for some lost, good place, and in that safety to continue to probe his own experience. When that safety too was lost, and when the reality and the fantasy of British supremacy was challenged by the Boer War, Kipling retreated into grandiose dreams, taking, his immense popularity indicates, a good many of the shaken British public with him. With Kim, Kipling seems to have given up hope of recovering from his narcissistic wounds. No longer a commentator on hypocritical imperial power, he now embraces it completely, wrapping it in the gauze of impossible perfection; "Never was such a chela. Temperate, kindly, wise, of ungrudging disposition, a merry heart upon the road, never forgetting, learned, truthful, courteous"(255).

Works Cited


2 The poem, "A Song of White Men," is not often anthologized. I found it on a Newcastle University website which offers all of Kipling's poems. It is worth noting that the poem is also available on a website called "ilovewhitefolks.com," along with "The White Man's Burden" and Kipling's "The Stranger," a poem which urges people to stay with their "own stock" even if "bitter bad they may be." Kipling is the only poet included on the site, which offers a variety of comment on the ills of integration and the inferiority of non-whites.

Notes

1 Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1969. All subsequent references are to this edition of the translation and will be given parenthetically in the text. (Back to Main Text)

2 The contestation of his own rules is a recurring motif in Freud's theoretical writings. He tends to challenge his own findings and generalizations with seemingly opposing examples, which, in closer inspection, turn out to strengthen the overall rule. This rhetorical give-and-take can be seen, in addition to the rule of quoted speech, in the general explanation of dreams as wishfulfillment. In the latter case, even the traumatic dreams, which haunt and taunt the dreamer, express the wish to work through the trauma in question (Freud, "Remarks" 4-5; Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams 268). (Back to Main Text)

3 Freud's conception of language in dreams could, of course, be analyzed with the help of post-Lacanian linguistics as well. For instance, Noam Chomsky's E-language/I-language division could provide a useful tool for thematizing Freud's linguistic oppositions and restrictions. For strategic reasons, however, I have utilized a different frame of reference in the present article. (Back to Main Text)

Works Cited


condemnation, and there are many Credit as well as Debit entries in the moral balance-sheet of British rule in India. Furthermore, Kipling's attitude to his material is more varied than the stereotype would suggest. (2) Baa Baa, Black Sheep, Kipling's semi-autobiographical account of childhood, he reveals recurrent preoccupations as the story dramatizes the difference between the East and West. Throughout his writings Kipling seems to be searching for a structure of belief that would recognize the reality of both love and hate, and the reality of their co-existence. Sullivan examines Kim and Mowgli's mutual '[division] between their desire to be loved and their need to control and be feared.' (i) Quoting from The Second Jungle Book 'all the Jungle was his friend, and just a little afraid of him' (130). This coincides with Mohanty's point regarding Kaa and Mowlgi's play fighting. Rudyard Kipling. Baa Baa, Black Sheep, Have you any wool? Yes, Sir, yes, Sir, three bags full. One for the Master, one for the Dame— None for the Little Boy that cries down the lane. Of all the creatures under Heaven's wide cope We are most hopeless, who had once most hope, And most beliefless, who had most believed. A.H. Clough. ALL this time not a word about Black Sheep. He came later, and Harry, the black-haired boy, was mainly responsible for his coming. Judy—who could help loving little Judy?—passed, by special permit, into the kitchen and thence straight to Aunty Rosa's heart.