

Notes on Symbolism and Historical Context in Rikki Tikki Tavi

Historical Context:

When "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" was first published as part of the second volume of Kipling's Jungle Book in 1895, Great Britain commanded the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Indian subcontinent was one important part of the empire, which thousands of "Anglo-Indians," like Kipling himself, called home. The form of imperialism during Kipling's time was characterized by forceful imposition of British government and British culture upon the natives of a region. But imperialism was not just the practice of the British Empire's acts of colonization of other lands and people; it was also a philosophy that assumed the superiority of British civilization and, therefore, the moral responsibility of bringing their enlightened ways to less civilized peoples.

History of British rule in India:

England became interested in India in the 1500s because of a thriving spice trade.

The East India Company is formed and is granted the powers to maintain an army and a navy, declare war, and govern new territories.

The people of India, called Indians rebelled against the East India Company in 1857.

England stepped in and took control of India and it became a colony until 1947.

It finally gained independence in 1947 after a century-long struggle with the British government.

Symbolism:

Considering the symbolism he used when he wrote Rikki Tikki Tavi, Kipling suggests that the European way of life was civilized, normal, and morally sound, while the traditional ways of life of the colonized people were primitive, abnormal, or just plain wrong.

Setting:

The bungalow symbolizes the site of colonial power within the garden. In other words, what was once a part of India has now been taken over, replaced with a bungalow to house the colonizer and his family.

The garden represents India itself. Under the pressure of colonial rule (the bungalow), the garden has become half cultivated, meaning that part of it is shaped by the colonists but part of it remains as it once was. The dangerous cobras lurking in it aren't villains trying to destroy the hero's safe haven; they're natives trying to preserve their way of life. The danger it poses to the human characters has less to do with its inherent evilness than with the humans not knowing how to deal with it.

Characters:

"Good gracious," said Teddy's mother, "and that's a wild creature! I suppose he's so tame because we've been kind to him." (11)

The story sets up the British family as kind and generous people. But if we read the family as representing Britain's colonizing power in India, this view is, shall we say, a tad rose-tinted.

Then Rikki-tikki went out into the garden to see what was to be seen. It was a large garden, only half cultivated, with bushes as big as summer-houses [...]. (18)

The uncultivated aspect of the garden signifies the wilder nature of the Indian wilderness. Rikki-tikki's taming of it—of India—consists of the bulk of the conflict.

Teddy carried him off to bed, and insisted on Rikki-tikki sleeping under his chin. Rikki-tikki was too well bred to bite or scratch [...]. (39)

The narrator claims Rikki-tikki is too well-bred to bite or scratch but try telling that to the snake he just killed. No, Rikki-tikki only refrains from scratching the British family. He threatens all other matter of animal with violence, including Darzee and Chuchundra.

"We are very miserable," said Darzee. "One of our babies fell out of the nest yesterday and Nag ate him." (21)

The story sets up Nag as a baby killer very early, and the postcolonialist might read this as the story suggesting that Indian culture has a similar primitiveness and barbarity.

Consider this quote from "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi:

[...] because every well-brought-up mongoose always hopes to be a house-mongoose some day and have rooms to run about in, and Rikki-tikki's mother (she used to live in the General's house at Segowlee) had carefully told Rikki what to do if ever he came across white men. (17).

Unlike the free-willed hero above, here Rikki-tikki seems like someone who has given up his traditional role as an Indian for the comforts of colonial rule. He desires to become domesticated but not just by anyone. His mother specifically tells him to seek out and come into the good graces of the imperialist conquerors. So he protects the British family from the native dangers in exchange for the comforts of their home.

Nag and Nagaina are representative of India. After all, cobra imagery goes deep into Indian culture, and not just from fear of its poisonous bite. The culture also reveres the cobra, and the Hindu religion portrays it alongside some of its most important deities.

In this light, Rikki-tikki is working with his colonialist overlords to civilize and sanitize the garden for the British family. The cobras, which stand in opposition to such change, must be eliminated because they are getting in the way of the British's family's desire to live in the garden. (And never mind that the cobras lived in India first.)

In this light, Rikki-tikki is less a hero fighting for the protection of the family than a subject fighting to introduce the presence of his colonial masters to the land.

By defeating the cobras, Rikki-tikki has made the house safe for the British colonizers, but he had to destroy an important symbol of the Indian culture to do it. Here, the walls of the military encampment are seen less as keeping out cobras than as keeping the bungalow safe from India. Remember, during the time of the story, the British military maintained a presence in India to conquer and colonize the nation for imperial wealth, in part justifying its efforts by claiming to civilize what they saw as a "primitive" land.

In a way, we can almost see Rikki-tikki as a dark force in the story. As a creature native to India, Rikki-tikki conquers his native land for the comforts and trinkets of the bungalow, becoming a subject of colonization to do so.