Performance of Bereavement: ‘Ritual’ in Kipling’s Great War Texts

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John Kipling, Rudyard Kipling’s only son, went missing on 27 September, 1915, during the battle of Loos, and his remains were never found. This tragic episode about the famous writer’s son attracted much attention when the TV drama *My Boy Jack* was broadcasted on Armistice Day in 2007. The TV programme, adapted by the actor David Haig from his own play, which was first staged in 1997, starred such well-known actors as Daniel Radcliff and Kim Catrell.

Dorothea Flothow argues that the story of Rudyard and John Kipling has become popular, because it is well matched with a popular myth of the Great War: ‘The story of this unremarkable young man and his famous father serves as a symbol of what this conflict stands for to this day’.¹ The popular memory of the First World War is not the war’s factual account but a widespread feeling dominated by numerous stereotypical images or a myth, which Samuel Hynes defines as ‘a term to identify the simplified, dramatised story that has evolved in our society to contain the meanings of the war that we can tolerate, and so make sense of its incoherence and contradictions.’² The Great War consists of the ‘myth of the lost generation’, that of promising youths killed just before their prime, and the ‘myth of disenchantment’, that of innocent young men sent off to war, believing in the ideals of Honour or Glory, and finding themselves shocked and disillusioned.
by their war experiences, partly because of the ineptitude of stupid old generals. John Kipling is considered one of the typical boys who were sent off to be slaughtered in war, while his father is representative of the older generation who ‘fails to understand that this war does not resemble the heroic wars of his imagination’.³

Considered from this perspective, Kipling is blamed for what happened to his son, for he was an ardent propagandist of the war against Germany, who failed to understand the dark result toward which such patriotism and militarism would lead. Some Kipling’s readers want him to confess that he encouraged his son to join the army and die on the battlefield. Kipling, however, remains reticent about his loss. Kipling’s elusive manner, in facts, irritates such readers so greatly that they are sometimes driven by prurient desire to witness his hidden feeling by breaking down the boundary protecting his innermost feelings.

In Haig’s My Boy Jack, we find Kipling crying over the grave news about John’s fate in front of his wife, Carrie, who, when she first appears on the screen, expels reporters from her premises. This clearly suggests that, she, as the sole confidante of her husband, is the protector of the domestic sphere and supports Kipling in his private life. The following dialogue takes place immediately after a telegram arrives, which informs the Kiplings that their son went missing. Shocked at the news that her son is lost, Carrie directs her anger against her husband. Kipling says:

Do you want me to go down on my knees and admit that I murdered my son? I will if it satisfies you. Do you think a single day passes, when I don’t consider that possibility?
I think about it all the time. All the time. And what truly terrifies me, is that if I am to blame, what have I sent him on to, if anything at all. How could I condemn my son to oblivion? How could I do that to my Jack?\(^4\)

Hearing his heartfelt confession, Carrie quickly forgives her husband because she realises that he feels as much grief as she does at the loss of John, and she recognises how deeply he loves their son. The only reason Carrie and the audience forgive the writer is that his love for his son is genuine, however incompetent a politician he may be.\(^5\) In Haig’s view, therefore, Kipling is unjustly underestimated as an affectionate father lacking any insight.

In his fictionalization of Kipling’s experience of the First World War, however, Haig places too much emphasis upon what Kipling actually felt in private, completely ignoring what he presented to the public. Given that those who accuse Kipling are almost never engaged in reading Kipling’s substantial writing on the Great War and the mourning of the war dead, nor his works as a member of the Imperial War Graves Commission, one can safely assume that Haig is indulging himself in voicing the ‘true’ feeling of Rudyard Kipling.

The truth is that there is a persistent propensity to divide anything in Kipling’s texts into two categories, public and private. The point is that anything salacious or psychological is preferred more often than not. For instance, it sounds preferable that Kipling implicitly vents his suppressed grief over his son’s death by rendering it in the voice of a woman. ‘My Boy Jack’, which
became the title of Haig's play, is frequently considered evidence to prove that Kipling was always a devoted father mourning his son deeply. The narrator of the poem is a mother figure who is desperately waiting for the news of her son, who left her as a seaman.

‘Have you news of my boy Jack?’
   Not this tide.

‘When d’you think that He’ll come back?’
   Not with this wind blowing and this tide.

‘Has any one else had word of him?’
   Not this tide.
   For what is sunk will hardly swim,
   Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.

‘Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?’
   None this tide,
   Nor any tide,
   Except he did not shame his kind—
   Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide

Then hold your head up all the more,
   This tide,
   And every tide,
Because he was a son you bore,
   And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!  

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The grief of the mother who lost her son at sea is often identified with that of Kipling. David Bradshaw, for instance, contends that the device of the poem fails to conceal ‘the raw torment of Kipling’s mourning’. This argument reflects the view that Kipling’s true anguish seeps out in his sincere ‘private’ poems, while he refrains from exposing his feeling in his perfunctory ‘public’ works.

One of the literary critics who denounce Kipling’s ‘public’ work is Paul Fussell, who argues that Kipling belongs to the pre-war idyllic era when traditional moral action is ‘delineated in traditional moral language’. Examining the inscriptions in the British war cemeteries abroad, which Kipling chose as a member of the Imperial War Graves Commission, Fussell asserts that these cemeteries mark ‘the talent for weighty public rhetoric of Rudyard Kipling’ as well as marking the war dead buried in them. Compared with Kipling’s outmoded and empty words, Fussell notes, there are more pathetic and unforgettable inscriptions in the same cemetery: those which the families of the dead were allowed to put on their headstones. These private words are more genuine because they are more personal and express hopelessness than do the grand yet futile words of Kipling. It is obvious that Fussell displays a similar attitude toward Kipling’s public work; all his public language lacks ‘true’ feeling, which is the core of true art.

It would be incorrect to say that personal grief is absent in Kipling’s Great War texts. Yet at the same time, the tone of Kipling’s words inscribed on the war memorial is unmistakeably formal and ornamental. Clearly, Kipling does not regard personal feelings as something most precious that should be kept completely
within the enclosed domestic sphere, or can make his poem more genuine. What is characteristic about his words is that they always blur the distinction between the public and the private spheres, which is a nature of the language of remembrance formed through the experience of the Great War. When a public ritual was performed in commemoration of the war dead, the mourners shared their grief which can be called personal emotion. As Alex King observes, ‘Personal feelings and needs were deeply involved in the practice of commemoration; but it was the organisation of public action which gave it form’. That is to say, even though they are temporary, personal feelings comes into being through a performance conducted in a public space. What we should not overlook in Kipling’s war stories after 1914 is the idea of ‘ritual’, which lays down the rules for the conduct of life at a time of great atrocities. In this paper, I will explore below the theme of ritual as one of the most significant factors of mourning in Kipling’s Great War texts.

The notion of ritual at the time of the Great War is advanced in the short story ‘In the Interests of the Brethren’. It is set in a fictional Masonic Lodge in London, called ‘Faith and Works 5837’ where physically and mentally wounded soldiers attend a Masonic ritual performed at the Lodge of Instruction. These visitors come from every corner of the world: a wounded Canadian, a Scottish man ‘with only six teeth and half a lower lip to speak to any purpose’, a one-armed New Zealander and so on. Regardless of class and race, they come to be healed from the battlefield’s traumatic experiences. Brother Burges, the gathering’s organiser and a bereaved father whose son was killed in Egypt, declares that
he is a ritualist and that only ritual can console the soldiers sent to the war: ‘All Ritual is fortifying. Ritual’s a natural necessity for mankind. The more things are upset, the more they fly to it’ (68).

Although numerous soldiers on leave attend the Masonic ritual, it soon becomes clear that there are limits to what they can do for these suffering men. For example, a Brother watches the time lest a battered soldier miss his last train, and offers him a package of sandwiches made of the best ham from his farm in Berkshire. Yet the soldier sleeping on the sofa is tormented by the scene of the war front even when he is welcomed into a safe Lodge: ‘The Clergyman tip-toed directly behind the man’s head, and at arm’s length rapped on the dome of the helmet. The man woke in one vivid streak, as the Clergyman stepped back, and grabbed for a rifle that was not there’ (79). Thus, however carefully the Brother follows the ritual in preparing his special sandwich, it is impossible for the Brethren to forget the traumatic memory of the war.

Yet at the same time, the ritual is not always ineffective. One of the Brothers, for example, cannot help shedding tears because he feels deeply moved by the gathering. The Brothers are kind enough to overlook his behaviour: ‘Let him leak,’ said an Australian signaller. ‘Can’t you see how happy the beggar is?’ (70) It turns out that the crying man is a ‘shell-shocker’ who is a devoted attendee of the ritual, not a troublemaker who disrupts it: ‘Were he refused, he would have fits from pure disappointment. So the “shocker” went happily and silently among Brethren evidently accustomed to these displays’ (70). The text indicates that the ritual of the Lodge is not necessarily without its meaning. The ritual does help the suffering men more or less, but it cannot heal
them altogether. What is characteristic about the ‘ritual’ is that it is both effective and vain at the same time.

To explore the notion of Kipling’s ritual, especially its relation to the public commemoration of fallen soldiers, we will focus on the ritual which was primarily organised by the Imperial War Graves Commission and to which Kipling contributed as a literary adviser. The origin of the Commission was the Graves Registration Commission, a small organisation directed by Fabian Ware which belonged to the British Red Cross. It became the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries in 1916 and the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917. The Commission’s aim was to register the names of the dead, bury them in cemeteries, and ensure that the locations of the graves of the all British war dead were identified. The unprecedented number of casualties in this technologically advanced war had aroused the desire to bury all remains properly, which further contributed to the desire to recover as many of the dead as possible. Since the confused state of the front made this impossible, people became eager to list the names of the fallen, instead of interring remains with a name on a headstone. As Bob Bushaway points out, ‘the compulsion to record the names of those who had been killed is a remarkable departure from the British experience of earlier wars and was a powerful impulse towards the development of remembrance’.12

The long list of the names of the fallen soldiers whose bodies had never been recovered was inscribed on war memorials. One example is the Cenotaph, which means ‘empty tomb’, and which was unveiled during the ritual of Remembrance Sunday in Whitehall, in 1920. People gathered to mourn their loved ones at
the altar which was at first temporary but later became permanent.

Thousands of the bereaved left wreaths at the makeshift altar, projecting their grief onto the void within or the un-adorned classical façade of the makeshift structure. Public opinion demanded that what had been intended as a temporary prop made of wood and plaster be rebuilt as a monument in permanent stone.¹³

It is highly suggestive that the memorial once meant to be temporary was later turned into an imperishable one made of stone. Without the identified bodies of the dead, it was impossible to bring closure to the process of mourning which would ensure the consolation for the bereaved. The burial of the dead is permanently suspended and people had to endure unfinished mourning for evermore.

The tragedy of the bereaved, that they lost their beloved in the war and could not mourn them, fostered, in Jay Winter's words, a fellowship of commemoration. Mourners assembled to share their personal grief, which no one was able to resolve successfully. These moments of fellowships occurred because of the impossibility of knowing what had happened to the loved ones at the front and where they were buried. Kipling's poem titled 'London Stone' precisely demonstrates this sense of emptiness shared by people with similar experiences.

When you come to London Town,

(Grieving — grieving!)
Bow your head and mourn your own,
With the others grieving

For those minutes, let it wake
(Grieving – grieving!)
All the empty-heart and ache
That is not cured by grieving.

[...] 

Heaven’s too far and Earth too near,
(Grieving – grieving!)
But our neighbour’s standing here,
Grieving as we’re grieving.¹⁴

Through the ritual of grieving together, each of the bereaved could realise that he or she was not the only person being suspended in the process of mourning. They all experienced a sense of emptiness and solace at the same time. As Daniel Karlin argues, in this paradoxical fellowship, 'Your neighbour’s grief is unspeakable, or can only be expressed as a negative quantity that what cannot be counted or weighed, all that can be said of it is that it is equivalent to yours'.¹⁵ When people gathered before the empty monument of remembrance, all their suffering became manageable while the ritual was performed because they at least did not have to endure it by themselves. Moreover, regardless of social rank or race, all deaths were to be treated equally, which was one of the
most significant principles of the Commission. In other words, under the democracy of bereavement, The British could realise how equally vulnerable they had become through the loss of a loved one.

Kipling's Great War texts also explore how the bereaved should manage to tolerate their loss. Four short stories collected in *The Eyes of Asia* are mainly narrated by Asian narrators, most of them Sikhs, who belong to the Indian army sent to Europe for the first time to participate in the war. In letters addressed to their families in India, the Asian narrators depict the European life and culture which they see for the first time. Among these reports, they pay attention to the difference in the way of mourning between Europeans and Asians. A narrator observes: 'It is not their [French people's] custom to scream or beat the breast. They recite all prayers above the grave itself for they reckon the burial-ground to be holy'. Compared to people in his country, according the narrator, French mourners are far from hysterical.

Observing a French woman living in a billet who treats him like a family member, the Sikh soldier notices that she hardly shows her feeling, even though she has lost her three sons in the war. He argues that her reticence is a fruit of her education which should also be provided to women in his country. He also observes that instead of indulging in their personal emotion, French people keep accounts of their loss and endure it together, silently and patiently.

The whole of the country of France is in one great account against the enemy—for the loss, for the lives, and for the
shames done. It has been kept from the first. The women
keep it with the men. All French women read, write, and cast
accounts from youth. By this they are able to keep the great
account against the enemy. (69-70)

It is significant that although these people ‘keep the great account
against the enemy’, they have no plans to square accounts with
Germans. The absence of the enemy makes it inevitable for them
to bear the unbearable, which is held in high esteem by the Sikh
soldier. The Asian custom of grieving, on the other hand, is to
settle the account with an enemy as promptly as possible. In
the second letter of *The Eyes of Asia*, ‘The Fumes of the Heart’,
Indian soldiers vow vengeance on Germans when a village girl is
slaughtered by a German shell. They pick up and count the beads
of a cross belonging to the dead girl, and kill the same number of
German soldiers to settle the account.

“Certain men of our Regiment divided among themselves
as many as they could pick [sic] up of the string of such
beads that used to be carried by the small maiden who
the shell slew. [. . .] The Regiment made an account of it,
reckoning one life of the enemy for each bead. [. . .] It was
seven weeks before all her beads were redeemed because the
weather was bad and our guns were strong and the enemy
did not stir abroad after dark. When all the account was
cleared, the beads were taken out of pawn and returned to her
grandfather, with a certificate, and he wept. (41-42)
Like the loyal Sikh soldier who accompanies his white master to South Africa and tries to execute the enemy in ‘Sahib’s War’, the Sikhs in this story do not hesitate to kill their enemy in the most brutal way. Of course it is uncomfortable to see that Kipling projects hatred onto the Indian to affirm the white man’s superiority. These texts with Sikh narrators, however, are worth reading closely if we are to consider the importance of Kipling’s ritual which cannot completely heal the bereaved.

One of the most significant effects of the ritual of remembrance is that it enables people to constrain their aggressiveness. If driven by an outrageous hatred, one can become a heartless monster, like the Sikh soldiers, who lose themselves in rage and grief, and kill their enemy with pleasure. They are blamed because they use their loss, i.e., the girl’s death, to legitimatise their aggression. While Kipling’s ritual confounds any clear separation between the public and the private spheres, Sikhs become blind with hatred when their domestic sphere is threatened.

Kipling’s notion of ritual, in which people share their innermost grief without drawing a boundary between the public and the private, seems to be advisable for contemporary readers. That is, it tells us how to behave when we are violently attacked or deprived of our loved one. In her meditation on mourning and violence in response to September 11, Judith Butler argues that in order to maintain a commitment to peace, one has to realise how one is exposed to violence outside oneself and how vulnerable one becomes when one loses a loved one.

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the
skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.17

Easily influenced by the outside forces, our body can be both the object and the subject of violence. If we lose ourselves in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage, we might become an agent of violence, unless we are able to realise the vulnerability of our bodies. Since our bodies are open to ‘the public sphere’, an innermost feeling or drive might appear on the surface, which might drive us into committing an atrocity, as has happened with the Sikh soldiers. When they sense that their territory is invaded by unknown violence, they immediately find out the trespasser on the outside of their territory and assault him without ascertaining whether he is the enemy who is solely responsible for their loss. The sharp line between the public and the private reinforces the violence in the cycle of violence, and allows us to forget that we also might be an agent of violence. Through the performance of a ritual, that is, by keeping accounts of one’s loss, one can mourn the fallen loved one faithfully without becoming a barbaric monster oneself. The ritual prevents us from being arrested by cycles of violence and leads us to less violent outcomes.

‘The Gardener’, one of Kipling’s most well-known stories of commemoration, clearly demonstrates the notion of ritual which
we discussed above. Although the process of mourning in ‘The Gardener’ seems to be far from therapeutic, it is certain that Helen Turrell finds some solace in the foreign cemeteries constructed through a duly prescribed ritual of remembrance. As a relative of the war dead, Helen has to go through several British rituals, such as the construction of a local war memorial or the visit to a war cemetery established by an organization similar to the Imperial War Graves Commission. These official rituals not only arouse a sense of hollowness but also considerably affect the identity of people who perform them. Although coming from different backgrounds, they are all labelled as the family of the British soldiers who died for their country. Helen, recalling the disturbing sight of a munitions factory, perceives that through rituals, her identity is transformed into something empty and hollow:

Once, on one of Michael’s leaves, he had taken her over a munition factory, where she saw the progress of a shell from blank-iron to the all but finished article. It struck her at the time that the wretched thing was never left alone for a single second; and ‘I’m being manufactured into a bereaved next of kin,’ she told herself, as she prepared her documents.18

Filling the forms which are needed to initiate the search to find out where Michael might be, Helen feels that her identity is ‘manufactured’ into one of the ‘wretched’ things, such as a ‘shell’ or ‘a bereaved next of kin’. Curiously enough, Kipling at first emphasises the hollowness of ritual, indicating that Helen’s despair is caused by the machine-like process of ritual which forces her to
be a member of a society accepting the war and its losses.

Helen's identity is violently fabricated by the state for a second time when she is informed that 'the body of Lieutenant Michael Turrell had been found, identified, and reinterred in Hagenzeele Third Military Cemetery' (282). In this 'process of the manufacture', Helen, once a campaigner for the construction of war memorials, becomes one of the mourning civilians touring British military cemeteries built at former-battlefields on the Continent. Helen obeys the counsel and crosses the Channel, because she is afraid of the 'agony of being waked up to some sort of second life' (283). She follows the procedure of ritual so that she remains numb and does not have to feel further pain.

When Helen is informed that Michael's body has been found and properly buried, she receives 'the letter of the row and the grave's number in that row duly given' (282). This paper suggests that the grave is the place allotted not only to the dead Michael but also to the half-dead Helen, whose identity is distorted by the state. Ironically enough, the headstone of a grave, on which the name of the dead man is inscribed, stands on both the body of a soldier and a living person deprived of his or her former identity and buried alive. It is highly suggestive that at the cemetery people ask Helen if she knows her grave: "[Y]ou know your grave, of course?"; "Are you sure you know your grave?" (283). These commemorative rituals seem brutal and ruthless enough to nullify the identity of people who have lost their loved ones in the war.

Nevertheless, these rituals of naming appear to have some meaning at the end of the story. On the morning she visits
Michael’s grave, Helen loses her way in ‘a merciless sea of black crosses’, on the disorganised ground where the marking of graves has not been finished (286). Finally, Helen finds ‘a block of some two or three hundred graves whose headstones had already been set, whose flowers were planted out, and whose new-sown grass showed green’ (286). It is in this well-organised place that Helen meets the person who leads her to the precise location of her grave and identity. The gardener, who tells her where her son lies, is considered a ritualist who is able to understand the grief of the bereaved ‘with infinite compassion’. In this context, whether the gardener is Jesus Christ or not does not matter. He plays a significant role because, as one of the bereaved who had had a similar experience, he is able to understand Helen’s irrevocable loss.

Additionally, we must not overlook that the factor prompting Helen to accept the ritual of commemoration is her encounter with Mrs Scarsworth, who meets Helen on her way to the cemetery the day before. At first Mrs Scarsworth tells Helen that she has visited the cemetery nine times, not on her own account, but for her friends at home who have lost someone during the war. She goes there to report to them about the place where the war dead are buried, and sometimes photos are sent too. In the context of the ritual of remembrance, such pilgrimage is understood as ‘both a mass, public phenomenon performed in large groups and reported in the press, as well as at the same time an essentially private communion of the pilgrim with the person he or she had lost’. In case of Mrs Scarsworth, though she first claims that she has not lost anyone, she later confesses that she visits the cemetery
to see the grave of her lover who was not her husband but ‘the only real thing’ in all her life (285). She admits that her frequent visits to the cemetery are not for her friends who belong to the communities of mourning, but on account of her private love affair. Helen, who comes across as having a secret hidden from the public eyes, empathises with her and attempts to confess her own predicament, but Mrs Scarsworth flatly refuses to share her personal feeling: ‘Mrs Scarsworth stepped back, her face all mottled. “My God!” said she, “Is that how you take it?”’ (286) This married woman cherishes her hidden love, which is everything to her, so deeply that she cannot tolerate to exposing it before another person, even though this person is the very woman to whom she has made her confession. Soon Mrs Scarsworth disappears from the scene, and it is not known whether she finds consolation like Helen does, who accepts the sympathy of the gardener. ‘The Gardener’ clearly suggests that the ritual which Helen first abhors finally brings her peace of mind. The aspect of the ritual which is the focus of this paper is that of the bereaved choosing to share their private grief with other people who had had a similar experience.

NOTES


2 Samuel Hynes, ‘Personal Narratives and Commemoration’, in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Jay

3 Flothow, p. 65.


5 Another fictionalised treatment of the life of Rudyard Kipling offers a similar view that his love for children is a vindication of his political activity. Narrating Kipling’s bitter experience in Vermont when he quarrelled with his brother-in-law and eventually was forced to leave the United States, Lenore Blegvad argues that even though his political ideas were unacceptable, Kipling should be excused because he had a deep understanding of children: ‘In his personal life he always had a great affinity for children’. (Blegvad, *Kitty and Mr. Kipling: Neighbors in Vermont*, 121) It should be stressed that Blegvad does not object to his loving children, but to his being political.


9 ibid, p. 70.


references are to this edition.


18 Kipling, *Debits and Credits*, p. 282.