My Boy Jack

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID HAIG

David Haig was born in England in 1955. His mother was an opera singer, and his father was an army officer, later becoming the director of the Hayward Gallery—a well-known art gallery in London. As an actor, Haig has appeared in many plays, television shows, and movies, including numerous engagements with the Royal Shakespeare Company. His first play, *My Boy Jack*, premiered in 1997 and was later adapted as a movie for television starring Haig himself as Rudyard Kipling and Daniel Radcliffe as his son, Jack. Haig's second play premiered in 2000, followed by his third, *Pressure*, in 2014. In 2013, he became a member of the Order of the British Empire, an honor that celebrates individuals who have made significant contributions to the arts (among other fields).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

My Boy Jack is set during—and in the direct lead-up to—World War I, which began in 1914 and ended in 1918. More specifically, the battle in which Jack goes missing is the Battle of Loos, which was on the Western Front in France and spanned from September 25th to October 8th in 1915. At that point in the war, the Battle of Loos was the biggest attack that British forces had mounted. During the battle, British and French companies gained small snatches of territory, but they ultimately failed to break through German lines of defense, largely because their artillery fire wasn't enough to take down important German machine-gun nests—a failure that plays a big role in Jack's fate in *My Boy Jack*. The play's portrayal of Rudyard's personal life in the aftermath of the Battle of Loos is dramatized, but the play is based on the real-life fact that Rudyard's son, John Kipling, went missing in action in the Battle of Loos. As is the case in the play, Rudyard and his wife, Carrie, spent the next two years trying to retrace what happened to their son. It's also true that John was nearsighted, and that Rudyard Kipling had to use his influence as a famous author to gain him entrance into the Irish Guards.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because it's set during World War I, *My Boy Jack* is worth considering alongside R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End*. While *Journey's End* takes place entirely in the trenches of France during the war, *My Boy Jack* is mostly set in Rudyard Kipling's drawing room in Sussex, England, but both plays explore the deep uncertainty of waiting for something terrible to happen. Rudyard and Carrie, for instance, wait two years to find out that Jack has died, and during this time they find themselves in a state of agony. Similarly, the soldiers in *Journey's End* wait tensely in the trenches for a German attack. *My Boy Jack* also has certain similarities with Alan Seeger's poem "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," since the speaker of this poem makes peace with his own imminent death in battle out of a sense of duty to his country—a brave and selfless mentality that Rudyard Kipling champions in *My Boy Jack*. On another note, the play references some of Kipling's most famous works, such as *The Jungle Book*, *Just So Stories for Little Children*, and *Puck of Pook's Hill*, alluding to these titles as a way of reminding the audience that Kipling was a real person and, moreover, a famous writer. To that end, the history of the Irish Guards that he works on at the end of the play is a real book called *The Irish Guards in the Great War*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** My Boy Jack
- **When Published:** The play premiered on October 13, 1997.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama, Realism
- **Setting:** Sussex, England and the Western Front during World War I
- **Climax:** After waiting for several hours to storm enemy lines, Jack leads his men in a charge toward the German trenches.
- **Antagonist:** War and idealism

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Set. Certain scenes in the 2007 film *My Boy Jack* (starring David Haig, Daniel Radcliffe, and Carey Mulligan) were filmed outside Rudyard Kipling's actual house in Sussex, England.

Namesake. The play is named after Rudyard Kipling's 1916 poem "My Boy Jack," which Rudyard reads aloud in the final scene. Although it's often assumed that Kipling wrote this poem about his son's death, it's debatable whether or not this is true, since the poem originally appeared at the beginning of a short story about an entirely different battle than the one in which his son, John, died.

PLOT SUMMARY

It's 1913, and the famous British author Rudyard Kipling is in the drawing room of his home in Sussex, England. In the dark, book-filled room, he helps his 15-year-old son, Jack, prepare for a meeting with military doctors later that day. Jack is

nearsighted and can't see without glasses, but Rudyard wants him to wear a **pince-nez**, thinking this will make him look dignified. Jack, however, hates the pince-nez, which keeps slipping off his nose as his father drills him with practice questions about why he wants to join the army.

Jack tries to talk about protecting England's way of life against German invasion, but he gets too frustrated to go on, the pince-nez falling off and distracting him. Hearing his frustration, his mother, Carrie, enters and tells Rudyard to go easy on him, but Jack pretends to be fine. He then stands up straight and delivers a flawless speech about his desire to fight for his country, making Rudyard very proud.

At the Army Medical Board, Rudyard and Jack meet Major Sparks and Colonel Pottle. Sparks and Pottle want to ask Rudyard questions about his life, since they're fans of his writing. But Rudyard directs their attention to Jack, wanting them to focus on getting him into the army. After a vision test, though, Sparks says Jack is too nearsighted to be a soldier. He and Pottle were ready to bend the rules, but they can't in good conscience make such a big exception. If Jack lost his glasses in battle, he would be a danger to himself and other soldiers. Rudyard calls Sparks and Pottle cowards and storms out of the room.

That night, Jack talks to his older sister, Elsie, about the army, revealing that he only wants to enlist to get away from home. He feels stifled by the pressure coming from his father, which is so overwhelming that it makes Jack feel "sick." Elsie doesn't think Jack has to join the army just to get away, but Jack says it's his best choice right now.

Three months later, Elsie returns from a trip to discover that Jack has managed to enlist. World War I has begun, so she's worried about her brother's safety. She peppers Rudyard with questions about how he managed to get Jack into the army, but Rudyard ignores her, looking out the window because Jack is due home for a visit.

When he arrives, Jack looks older and more confident, seeming to love military life. He's a lieutenant with the Irish Guards and has spent the past few days marching nonstop. As he tells his family this, Elsie interrupts and asks how he enlisted after failing the physical examination. Jack explains that Rudyard's influential friend pulled some strings. Elsie then learns that Rudyard pressured his friend to do this when the man was on his deathbed, making it hard for him to refuse. Elsie is enraged and worried, but Rudyard ignores her, believing that Jack is doing his country a great service.

A year later, Jack is in the trenches on the Western Front. It's raining heavily, and he has taken it upon himself to help his men avoid getting trench foot. He inspects their feet, giving them powder and grease to apply as necessary. Two of his men, Bowe and Doyle, willingly show him their feet, but a confrontational soldier named McHugh refuses. He resents that Jack is a British Protestant commanding a group of Irish Catholics. Unfazed by McHugh's animosity, Jack focuses on Bowe and Doyle, discovering that Bowe has a dangerous blister between his toes. He brings Bowe some dry socks and instructs Doyle to take care of him.

Meanwhile, the sound of artillery gets louder, as Allied forces bombard the German trenches in preparation for an attack. Not long before Jack and the others are supposed to charge out of their own trenches and rush toward enemy lines, Bowe pretends to be sick and tries to return to the dugout, but McHugh and Doyle won't let him leave, forcing him to honor his soldierly duty. When the moment comes, Jack leads his men out of the trenches, McHugh and Doyle screaming as they go.

Back in Sussex, Rudyard receives a telegram informing him that Jack has gone missing in action. Carrie is beside herself, but Rudyard insists that this doesn't mean Jack is dead—maybe he's just lost. Carrie doesn't listen, instead asking why Rudyard forced their son into the army. Defending himself, Rudyard insists that Jack did the right thing by enlisting and that it's a great honor to protect one's country. If Jack *has* died in battle, then his death will have been the brightest, proudest moment of his short life—something Rudyard wouldn't want to have deprived the boy of by keeping him out of the military.

Two years later, Jack is still missing. Rudyard and Carrie have spent the years interviewing members of the Irish Guard about what happened on the day of his disappearance. Carrie is still going strong on this project, but Rudyard is exhausted. One day, though, a man named Mr. Frankland appears with a soldier who has new information about Jack. The soldier, it turns out, is Bowe. He is severely traumatized and has a hard time getting through his story, but he eventually reveals that he, Jack, and McHugh successfully made it to the German trenches on that rainy day (which is now known as the Battle of Loos). Once they were safe, Jack said they had to push on and attack a huge machine-gun post towering before them. McHugh called him crazy, but Jack blew a whistle, and the men ran out of the trenches for a second time.

The next thing Bowe knew, he was lying in a pit. McHugh yelled at him to retreat, but Bowe wanted to stay because Jack had been injured: the lower half of Jack's face had been blown off. Unsure what to do, Bowe ran away with McHugh, at which point a shell exploded right where Jack was lying.

When Bowe leaves the drawing room, Rudyard tries to take comfort in the fact that Jack died bravely leading men into battle. Carrie refuses to see it this way, insisting that their son died a terrible death and that Rudyard's patriotic ideas about duty and honor can't change this. She even implies that Rudyard himself can't possibly find comfort in these ideas, and he admits he's tortured by the thought that he might be partially responsible for Jack's death. He then breaks into tears, and Carrie says she feels "more dead than alive." Regaining his composure, Rudyard promises that they'll "manage" to get by

despite this tragedy. And yet, he spends the rest of his life thinking about his terrible loss.

CHARACTERS

Rudyard Kipling – Rudyard Kipling is a famous British author (and was in real life, too). An idealistic and proud man, he believes strongly in the British Empire, thinking that England's colonial expansion has improved the lives of people all over the world. This is why he wants his son, Jack, to join the army and fight on England's behalf in World War I, fearing the idea of Germany dismantling the British Empire's power. Moreover, he simply believes that young men like Jack have a responsibility to protect their country, even if this means making a great sacrifice. This belief causes him to push Jack toward the army, even though Jack is so nearsighted that he fails both the navy and army's physical examinations. Still, Rudyard urges Jack to keep trying, ultimately creating tension between him and his wife, Carrie. Both Carrie and Rudyard's daughter, Elsie, resent him for pressuring Jack, objecting to Rudyard's obsession with bravery, which they believe puts Jack in harm's way. When Jack is killed in action (after Rudyard pulled strings to get him into the army), Rudyard tries to find comfort in the idea that his son died an honorable death. Carrie, however, gets him to admit that he feels guilty about putting Jack in danger, even if he *does* believe in the value of sacrifice. Rudyard thus finds himself torn between his own grief and his romanticized belief in the value of honor.

John "Jack" Kipling – Jack Kipling is Rudyard and Carrie's only son. He's only 15 years old at the beginning of the play. Despite his youth, though, he's eager to join the army. In this respect, he and his father agree, since Rudyard wants Jack to help defend England in World War I. However, Jack is so nearsighted that neither the navy nor the army will let him enlist. He also resents his father's constant pressure and overbearing support—Rudyard pushes him to be the best he can be, whether this means making Jack wear a **pince-nez** instead of glasses or urging him to deliver speeches about the importance of "preserving" England's greatness. In contrast to his father's idealistic patriotism, Jack only wants to join the army because it would allow him to get away from home—or, more accurately, get away from Rudyard and his domineering ways. He tells his sister, Elsie, that he often wishes he were "someone else," though he amends this by saying that what he actually wants is to be *himself*, which feels to him like the same thing as being "someone else." This suggests that he feels stifled by his father's expectations, as if he can't even be himself in front of Rudyard. And yet, this apparently changes when Jack finally enlists in the army (after Rudyard pulls some strings). Suddenly, Jack agrees with his father that serving in the military is a deeply honorable thing, and he takes his role as a lieutenant in the Irish Guards very seriously—so seriously, in fact, that he leads his men toward certain death, eventually dying a gruesome death in the trenches.

Carrie Kipling – Carrie is Rudyard's wife and Jack's mother. Unlike Rudyard, she doesn't like the idea of Jack fighting in World War I, worrying that his nearsightedness will put him in grave danger on the battlefield. However, she has a hard time convincing Rudyard of the dangers of sending Jack off to war, since her husband has such romanticized beliefs about the value of honor, bravery, and duty. For the most part, Carrie keeps her reservations to herself, though she subtly challenges Rudyard's beliefs in the lead-up to Jack's death. Then, once they discover that Jack has died in action, she openly rails against Rudyard's intense patriotism, taking no comfort in the idea that Jack died doing something honorable. She also accuses Rudyard of not *fully* believing in the value of "glory" and responsibility himself, suggesting that even he can't find true relief in the idea that Jack died for a worthy cause. In this way, she exposes the tension between Rudyard's idealistic beliefs and his personal grief.

Elsie "Bird" Kipling – Elsie is Rudyard and Carrie's daughter and Jack's older sister. An independent person, she's used to her father ignoring her in favor of Jack. This dynamic even existed back when Josephine—her older sister who died as a child—was still alive, since Josephine was Rudyard's favorite daughter. Despite her own lonely home life, Elsie doesn't understand when Jack tells her that he wants to leave by any means necessary, even if this involves joining the army and putting his life at risk. She has a hard time empathizing with Jack's desperation because she doesn't know what it's like to deal with Rudyard's overbearing expectations—after all, nobody really pays attention to her in the Kipling family, so she can't grasp Jack's desire to escape. She therefore tries to convince Jack that he doesn't need to join the army just to get away from home, but he doesn't listen. She also doesn't like the idea of Jack going to war because, like her mother, she worries that his nearsightedness will put him in terrible danger. For this reason, she's incensed when her father finds a way to get around the military's physical requirements, successfully getting Jack into the army. If Jack dies, she says, it will be Rudyard's fault—a thought that seems to stay with Rudyard, considering that he breaks down after Jack dies and admits that he's guilty for pressuring his son to join the army.

Guardsman Bowe – Bowe is a member of the Irish Guards who serves under Jack's command. Originally from a farm in Ireland, he has trouble adjusting to the terror of life at war. On the night that Jack and the other Guards storm enemy lines, Bowe tries to avoid participating in the attack by claiming to be sick. However, his fellow soldiers, Doyle and McHugh, don't let him return to the dugout, forcing him to stay and fight by their sides. Two years after Jack goes missing, Bowe comes to Rudyard's house and tells the Kipling family what happened, explaining that he, Jack, and McHugh made it safely to the

enemy trenches, at which point Jack insisted that they push on. As soon as they started running toward a large machine-gun post, though, a large blast threw Bowe into the trenches again, and he saw that Jack had been severely injured. He wanted to help, but McHugh convinced him to run away, and just in time—a shell exploded moments later, decimating Jack. Bowe's failure to help Jack contrasts with Jack's own fearlessness in the face of danger—an idea that at least allows Rudyard to feel that his son was brave.

Guardsman McHugh – McHugh is a member of the Irish Guards, serving alongside Bowe and Doyle. An individualistic, selfish man, he doesn't respect the fact that Jack is his lieutenant and, as a result, often defies his orders. This is because McHugh dislikes the idea of a Protestant from England commanding a company of Irish Catholics, having trouble putting this cultural division aside in order to present a united front against Germany. In this sense, McHugh has qualities that are in direct opposition to how Rudyard thinks people should behave. Whereas Rudyard believes in the value of personal sacrifice when it serves a greater good, McHugh thinks only of himself—something that becomes quite apparent when he runs away to save himself after Jack gets injured in battle.

Guardsman Doyle – Doyle is a member of the Irish Guards. Jack is his lieutenant, and Bowe and McHugh are his fellow soldiers. Along with McHugh, he stops Bowe from sneaking away to avoid battle, suggesting that he believes everyone should uphold their soldierly duties. It's unclear what becomes of Doyle after he and the others rush out of the trenches toward enemy lines. However, when Bowe tells the Kipling family what happened that day, he briefly mentions that Doyle was shot and fell while running across the battlefield.

Major Sparks – Major Sparks is the army doctor who gives Jack a physical examination to determine if he's qualified to enlist in the army. The entire time he inspects Jack, he tries to talk to Rudyard, since he—along with his colleague, Colonel Pottle—are such big fans of Rudyard's books. Things get awkward, though, when Sparks realizes Jack can't even read the top line of letters on a vision test. Because of this, Sparks says, Jack can't join the army. Sparks and Pottle were both willing and ready to bend the rules for Rudyard's sake, but bending them *this* far is simply out of the question. This enrages Rudyard, who suggests that Sparks and Pottle are both cowards for sticking so closely to the rules.

Colonel Pottle – Colonel Pottle is an official at the Army Medical Board, where Rudyard takes Jack for a physical examination to determine if he can serve in the army. While his colleague, Major Sparks, inspects Jack, Pottle eagerly talks to Rudyard about cars and about writing, since he's a big fan of his books. But when Sparks and Pottle discover Jack's severe nearsightedness, they tell Rudyard that they couldn't possibly let the boy into the army. They would have been happy to bend the rules in this regard if Jack's sight were a little better, but this is simply out of the question. Rudyard, for his part, calls Sparks and Pottle "spineless" and promises to write an angry letter to their superiors.

Mr. Frankland – Mr. Frankland is a former soldier who served in the British Rifle Corps. He's friends with Bowe because they both wound up in the same hospital while fighting in World War I. Having heard that Rudyard and Carrie are interviewing Irish Guardsmen, Frankland brings Bowe to their house to tell them that Jack is dead.

Josephine Kipling – Josephine was Rudyard and Carrie's eldest child before she died at the age of seven. Her painting now hangs in the family's drawing room. Jack only remembers what she looked like because of this portrait. Elsie, on the other hand, remembers Josephine a bit better, recalling that she was Rudyard's favorite daughter. As for Carrie, she felt like a part of herself died along with Josephine, but time eventually made her feel better—a healing process that, in the aftermath of Jack's death, Rudyard implies will happen again.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BRAVERY, DUTY, AND HONOR

My Boy Jack is about the famous British author Rudyard Kipling and his belief that all young men have a responsibility to defend their country. This is why Rudyard wants his son Jack to fight in World War I. In fact, he obsesses over the importance of sacrifice and bravery so much that he ignores the very real possibility that Jack might die in combat. Of course, he's *aware* that Jack might die, but he overlooks this upsetting possibility because he believes so strongly in the value of putting oneself in danger for a greater purpose. However, the play challenges this romanticization of bravery by highlighting Rudyard's struggle after Jack dies a gruesome death in the trenches. Rudyard tries to ease the pain of losing his only son by focusing on the supposed "glory" of dying in battle, but it's unclear if this brings him true comfort. Even Rudyard's wife, Carrie, doesn't believe him—she believes that all of his talk about honorable sacrifice is just a "performance," not something that actually makes him feel better about Jack's death. In this way, the play questions whether or not idealizing duty and bravery makes it any easier to cope with the real-life experience of losing a loved one—even in the name of honor.

Rudyard's gung-ho ideas about integrity and responsibility allow him to approach the horror of war in abstract, idealized

ways. Instead of focusing on the gruesome violence, he mainly thinks about the "glory" of defending one's own country. In other words, by romanticizing the idea of duty, he manages to avoid thinking about his own son dying in battle. For instance, when Jack is reported missing in action, Carrie immediately worries that he's dead, but Rudyard's deep appreciation of bravery and sacrifice insulates him from this fear. He insists that, if Jack is dead, his death "will have been the finest moment of his young life." This reaction shows Rudyard's strong belief in the value of things like courage, but it also emphasizes just how much he has glamorized dying in battle—so much, it seems, that he almost completely overlooks the pain of losing a son.

But the play casts doubt on whether or not Rudyard's idealistic viewpoints are truly as reassuring to him as they seem. He likes the idea that Jack died for something bigger than himself, since this lends purpose to the boy's otherwise senseless and violent death. And yet, Carrie suggests that Rudyard doesn't find quite as much comfort in this thought as he lets on. When he first learns that Jack has died, he doesn't immediately break into tears, but instead slowly processes the news and then says, "He led his men from the front, and was courageous in the face of considerable enemy fire." He clearly says this as a way of making himself feel better, but Carrie doesn't go along with this idea. She simply doesn't find the thought helpful—after all, it doesn't change the fact that her only son is gone.

Carrie shows a similar kind of skepticism when Rudyard says, "It was a short life, but in a sense complete. I'm happy for him, and proud of him, aren't you?" She doesn't dignify this idea with a response. It's almost as if her unwillingness to even entertain such thoughts only makes Rudyard *more* desperate to convince her (and, perhaps, himself) that Jack died for a good reason. But Carrie isn't "happy for" Jack. To the contrary, she's devastated by his death. To show the absurdity of her husband's unhelpful ideas about honor, then, she reminds him of the exact circumstances of their son's death, saying, "He died in the rain, he couldn't see a thing, he was alone, in pain, you can't persuade me there is any glory in that." Carrie challenges the notion that a brave death is an honorable one. To Carrie, it doesn't *matter* what her son was fighting for, since the end result is that he died a painful death in the trenches. Her grounded (and depressing) viewpoint helps illustrate that Rudyard's romanticized ideas about honor are out of touch with the bleak reality of Jack's death.

Perhaps *because* his romanticization of "glory" is so out of touch with reality, Rudyard has a hard time maintaining his idealistic outlook after definitively learning that Jack has died. Carrie recognizes Rudyard's difficulty when she comments that she doesn't think he really believes in his own values surrounding bravery. Rudyard defensively insists that he does, saying, "I must 'believe' in order to survive at all," but his response ironically confirms her accusation, since he is in fact confirming his wife's implication that he clings to idealistic thoughts as a way of protecting himself from the pain of losing Jack. By saying that he *has* to "believe" in honor and bravery, he essentially admits that his ideals are all he has left. When Carrie pushes him on this point, he starts sobbing, admitting that he's tormented by the possibility that he's responsible for Jack's death. Through Rudyard's final overwhelming grief, the play illustrates that simple idealistic ideas about glory and honor aren't enough to fully protect him from grief, or, by extension, to justify the senseless death and destruction of war.

PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

In *My Boy Jack*, Rudyard lets his high expectations as a parent overshadow what his son actually wants out of life. Rudyard wants Jack to become a courageous and respected military official, and this blinds him to the fact that Jack resents him for exerting so much parental pressure. Part of the reason it's hard for Rudyard to see this dynamic is that Jack legitimately *wants* to join the army, which makes it seem like he and his father are on the same page. In reality, though, Jack only wants to enlist because he's desperate to get away from Rudyard, who stifles him not just with his high expectations, but also with his ideas surrounding masculinity and strength, always telling Jack to "buck up" and trying to get him to act like a stereotypically manly soldier. Rudyard's vision of Jack's life doesn't actually have much to do with Jack himself. Instead of encouraging Jack to become a soldier because this is legitimately what Jack wants, Rudyard pressures him because he thinks it's the right thing to do—something that he himself would do if he were a young man. While Jack actually comes to enjoy military life after enlisting in the army, this doesn't change the fact that his initial desire to join was driven not by his wish to contribute to the war effort, but by his burning need to escape his domineering father. The negative impact of Rudyard's expectations is therefore quite clear, demonstrating that such overbearing parenting run the risk of pushing children down certain paths for all the wrong reasons.

Rudyard's style of parenting feels so overbearing because he micromanages seemingly every aspect of Jack's life. Before a meeting with army doctors, for example, Rudyard fusses over Jack's physical appearance, insisting that he wear a **pince-nez** (glasses without earpieces) instead of regular glasses. Jack, however, hates the pince-nez because it constantly slips off his nose, making it hard for him to deliver a speech about wanting to join the army—a speech that Rudyard is adamant about him practicing and delivering with confidence. Despite Jack's complaints, Rudyard says that the pince-nez gives "a man a different expression as compared to spectacles." Rudyard thinks the pince-nez makes Jack look dignified, and nothing Jack can say will persuade him to let go of the matter. This is a perfect illustration of how Rudyard imposes his own opinions upon Jack's life.

The parental pressure Rudyard places on Jack also has to do

with his ideas surrounding masculinity and strength. He's obsessed with turning his son into a tough man of influence and integrity, wanting Jack to join the army and thus demonstrate his courageousness. When Carrie tries to remind her husband that Jack is still just a teenager, Rudyard says, "He is not a boy, he is a young man. If you continue to pamper and paw him, you will turn him into something altogether weak and watery…" Rudyard, in other words, sees it as his parental duty to toughen Jack up. Although Carrie simply wants to keep Jack safe, Rudyard sees her concern as something that will hurt their son in the long run—according to Rudyard, leading a coddled, easy life will make Jack "weak." Rudyard justifies the pressure he exerts on his son by insisting that it's for Jack's own "sake."

But Rudyard's sense of parental responsibility keeps him from paying attention to Jack's actual feelings. If he were more attuned to Jack on an emotional level, he might realize that the expectations he has placed on the boy are overwhelming, ultimately driving Jack away from him. Indeed, even though Jack does want to join the army, this isn't because he shares his father's ideas about strength and valor. Rather, Jack just wants to escape his home life, which feels—because of Rudyard's expectations—stifling and oppressive. As Jack says at one point to his sister, Elsie, he sometimes wishes he could "be someone else for a while." He then revises this statement, saying that what he really wants is to just be himself, which feels to him like the "same thing" as being someone else. In these comments, it is clear that Rudyard's controlling parenting has pushed Jack so out of touch with who he really is that the mere idea of being himself seems as unfamiliar as being somebody else entirely.

Of course, Jack actually ends up *liking* military life, making it even harder for Rudyard to recognize the detrimental effects of his own stringent expectations. All the same, though, when Jack goes missing, Elsie pushes her father to see that Jack "didn't give a damn" about any of Rudyard's lofty ideas surrounding masculinity, strength, or duty. "The suffocation, the love, the expectation," Elsie says. "That's why he went." What's interesting about her argument here is that she includes the word "love" in her list of things that "suffocat[ed]" Jack at home. She acknowledges that Rudyard's high expectations for Jack originally came from a place of love—the problem, though, is that they still overwhelmed him and ultimately drove him away, highlighting that even well-intentioned forms of parental pressure can have negative consequences.

PATRIOTISM AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

My Boy Jack explore the real-life famous writer Rudyard Kipling's belief in the virtue and superiority of the British Empire. The play's portrayal of his patriotism is consistent with Kipling's actual views in real life, since he believed that England's colonial practices benefited not just England itself, but also the many countries it colonized. Rudyard cares so deeply in *My Boy Jack* about the threat of World War I because he worries that the war might dismantle England's power not just at home, but all over the world. By a modern standpoint his views are significantly outdated, since he takes the condescending and racist attitude that certain regions—in places like Africa and India—are like "bawling, inarticulate" children who depend on England for support. While this viewpoint is patronizing and offensive, it helps make sense of why Rudyard is so disturbed by World War I: he genuinely believes British rule is good for the world, so he finds any threat to England's power alarming. On a more basic level, he simply wants to preserve a certain British way of life, finding the thought of Germany overtaking England so horrifying that he's willing to put his son in danger to protect the country. Rudyard therefore believes that "no sacrifice" is "too great" when it comes to defending the British Empire—a belief that Jack's death ultimately puts to the test. As Rudyard deals with the tension between his abstract patriotism and his personal grief, the play shows that it's one thing to *talk* about the importance of defending one's country, but another thing entirely to actually suffer the consequences of such a sacrifice.

Rudyard is extremely proud of England's powerful position in the world. At a recruiting event, he speaks passionately about how England has never "known the shame of seeing a foreign army on [its] soil." The implication, then, is that England must continue to avoid such shame and must be protected at all costs. Any failure to do so, be believes, would be a terrible disgrace. Rudyard is therefore adamant that young men like Jack have a responsibility to serve their country.

Rudyard's logic about protecting one's own country could be applied to the citizen of any country. But Rudyard further believes that England is uniquely special—he thinks that the world relies on England. He sees England as a benevolent colonial power—an empire that has colonized a large swath of the world and, in doing so, improved the quality of life for people in those areas. When Elsie asks why he cares so much about Jack joining the army, he argues that everyone in England has a moral obligation to defend the "family of nations" that the British Empire has built. England, he says, is like a parent responsible for protecting its children. This is a condescending and, frankly, racist outlook, since Rudyard implies that the non-white places England has colonized are like helpless infants without the British Empire's support. And it is also a self-serving idea that takes it as simply true that England only *supports* the nations it has conquered rather than exploiting those countries for its own benefit—the historical truth is much more complicated than Rudyard seems to believe. While the accuracy or moral value of Rudyard's beliefs can be questioned, his perspective nonetheless explains why Rudyard is so convinced that defending England is of dire importance, since he legitimately believes that the fall of the British Empire would

profoundly harm the world at large. To preserve the world order, he thinks that everyone should be "willing to sacrifice everything to deliver mankind from evil"—a viewpoint that prioritizes England's safety over anything else.

But Rudyard isn't just concerned about protecting England's position as a global superpower: he's also worried about preserving the customs of British life. He makes this clear when he gives his recruitment speech, listing the specific ways that Germany could ruin the British way of life. He says that Germans will force British bricklayers to "lay bricks the German way" and that British farmers will have to farm like Germans. "They will tell us what to eat and how to eat it, what to mine and how to mine it, what to say and when to say it," he says. In short, Rudyard worries that a German invasion will erase British customs completely, as people will have to learn the German language, live in a German economy, and join German culture. The fact that Rudyard finds these potential changes so horrible spotlights his love of all things British. In fact, it's almost humorous how disgusted he is by small things like the thought of paying with a different currency, as if this would be a terrible form of torture. And yet, the fact that this possibility bothers Rudyard so much also makes perfect sense, since it represents a loss of British culture—something he cares about seemingly more than anything else.

However, Rudyard's extreme British patriotism becomes a bit more complicated in the aftermath of Jack's death. He doesn't abandon his patriotism; rather, Jack's death simply makes it a little harder for Rudyard make grand, sweeping declarations about the importance of patriotism. Upon learning of Jack's death, he claims that he is "happy" for Jack because Jack had the chance to do a noble thing by dying for his country. But Rudyard then also admits that he would "willingly lie down now and sleep for an eternity" if it would bring his son back. In other words, Rudyard's grief is so great that he would rather die than go on living without his son. He also admits to feeling "complicit" in Jack's death, implying that he pushed Jack toward unnecessary harm. Thoughts like these make it clear that Rudyard's ideas surrounding patriotic sacrifice aren't quite as cut and dry as they had been when the sacrifice was abstract, as opposed to the loss of his son's life. And yet, he still takes "comfort" in the fact that his grief is a "common agony," since so many other British families have lost their sons in the war. In the end, then, he still holds—perhaps clutches—his patriotic beliefs, even if his sadness makes it harder to prioritize the British Empire over all else.

LOSS AND RESILIENCE

My Boy Jack acknowledges and explores Rudyard's grief over losing Jack—even if the play *also* portrays him in a negative light for prioritizing honor and duty over his own son's life. Both he and his wife, Carrie, are already familiar with what it's like to lose a child, since one of their daughters, Josephine, died at the age of seven. In many ways, the memory of Josephine haunts the entire family: Jack struggles to remember what she was like, Elsie often thinks about how Josephine was her father's favorite daughter, and Carrie feels like part of herself died along with the young girl. Rudyard, in fact, is the only one who doesn't talk about how Josephine's death affected him, probably because he believes in standing strong and letting time heal his wounds. However, he's not able to stoically endure Jack's death, eventually breaking down and crying in front of Carrie. In this moment, he and Carrie are united in their grief and emotionally connected for arguably the first time in the entire play. In this way, *My Boy Jack* explores how difficult it is to handle profound loss with the kind of unflinching resilience that Rudyard tries to maintain, implying that grief often overcomes even the most emotionally stoic people.

In keeping with his beliefs about strength and bravery, Rudyard approaches emotional hardship with a sense of grit, clearly thinking that the only way to handle grief is to bear down and move on. When Jack comes home for his first leave after joining the Irish Guards, he tells Rudyard that he often thinks about two of his fellow soldiers who were recently killed. Opening up to his father, he says that he can't help but wonder if they were in pain before dying. At first, Rudyard empathizes with his son, kindly suggesting that Jack is experiencing a "loneliness of the spirit," which Rudyard recognizes is "awfully hard to bear." In fact, he even goes on to tell Jack about a close friend he lost as a young man, explaining that his friend's death deeply upset him and that he felt for a long time afterwards that the world was a "wicked place." Rudyard's comments suggest that he is perfectly aware of how hard it can be to cope with the loss of a loved one, since he himself has experienced the feelings of "loneliness" and even anger that often come along with grief.

And yet, Rudyard then tells Jack, "But you have to take your dose," metaphorically suggesting that loss is simply a part of life and that, since it's something everyone inevitably experiences, the only thing to do is swallow the sadness like a "dose" of bitter medicine and move on. "You sit it out," he says. "You wait. Eventually you heal up." Rudyard believes that emotional hardship is something that you can just push down and wait out—a mentality that doesn't necessarily help people process difficult emotions, even if it's true that the passage of time makes certain forms of grief easier to bear.

Unlike her husband, Carrie grapples with loss in a more straightforward way, allowing herself to acknowledge her pain instead of fixating on staying strong. When Rudyard tries to convince her that Jack died for an honorable cause and that she should see this as a comforting thing, she calls him a "cold fish." This insult suggests that Rudyard has numbed himself to emotional hardship. Carrie, on the other hand, fully recognizes the reality of Jack's death, that he died a horrible death in the rain while experiencing great pain. Instead of trying to move on

without dwelling on the ghastly details of her son's death, she lets herself feel the overwhelming grief of this loss.

Ironically, Carrie's willingness to actually feel sad and distraught in moments of emotional hardship is more courageous than Rudyard's supposedly resilient way of handling grief. Simply put, Carrie is more honest about her anguish because she confronts her feelings, whereas Rudyard just tries to bury his in the name of a show of strength. When their first daughter, Josephine, died at the age of seven, Carrie seemingly tried to act resilient in a similar way, since she says that she "sewed up the wound" and moved on. Now, though, after Jack's death she doesn't hide the fact that she feels "more dead than alive," and though admitting to having these feelings won't make her pain go away, she is—at the very least—allowing herself to mourn Jack instead of trying to maintain a stiff upper lip.

To that end, even Rudyard can't quite stay completely strong in the face of his own grief. He points out that Carrie believes in an afterlife and should therefore take comfort in the idea that Jack's soul still exists, to which Carrie responds, "But I miss him." In response, Rudyard says, "So do I," and it's at this point that he cries about Jack's death for the first time. The fact that he cries just after he straightforwardly admits to missing Jack underscores how powerful it is for him to simply acknowledge his emotions. No matter how badly he wants to show resilience and strength, nothing will stop him from missing his son. In this moment, Rudyard joins his wife in grief. They grieve not alone, but together. Yet moments later Rudyard tells Carrie that "We'll manage." The implication is that he will go back to "managing" his grief, to keeping that stiff upper lip. The comment in the play feels tragic, a retreat in which Rudyard had the chance to truly connect with his wife but retreated back into stuffing his emotions down and hiding them away. In this ending, the play suggests that Rudyard's "strength" is in fact weakness, that his resilience in the face of the griefs of the world is in fact a refusal to actually engage with the real world, and that in "managing" he isn't entirely living.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PINCE-NEZ

The pince-nez that Rudyard forces Jack to wear symbolizes his obsession with turning his son into a reputable, distinguished young man. Rudyard fusses over Jack's physical image, believing that the boy should wear a pince-nez (glasses without the earpieces) instead of regular glasses because this will give army doctors the "impression" that Jack is a refined gentleman—and this, he hopes, will possibly distract them from the fact that Jack can hardly see without eyewear. However, the pince-nez causes Jack great trouble because it keeps slipping off his face when he tries to practice what he'll say to the army doctors. The fact that the pince-nez actually works against him—making it harder for him to simply stand still and deliver a short monologue—is therefore a perfect representation of how Rudyard's overbearing nature burdens Jack, even though Rudyard supposedly wants to help him.

THE DEAD PIGEON

The death of Bowe's pigeon symbolizes the unavoidable feeling of uncertainty during wartime, since this pigeon is supposed to carry news of the platoon's safety back to the British lines. What's more, the fact that Bowe's pigeon dies before the battle even begins foreshadows the lack of information following Jack's disappearance. The Kipling family grapples with this feeling of uncertainty for two whole years, trying in vain to piece together what happened to Jack. During this time, though, nobody is able to give them concrete information, perhaps because so few people who were with Jack that day ended up surviving the Battle of Loos. In this sense, the dead pigeon (and its inability to bring back news of Jack's platoon) represents one of the most emotionally challenging aspects of losing a loved one to war—namely, that it's nearly impossible to know for sure what happened, leaving family members to grapple with loss in a state of fear and uncertainty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Nick Hern Books edition of *My Boy Jack* published in 2008.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

RUDYARD. Well, they'll check you over, they might want a bit of a chat ...(He looks at JOHN's suit.)The kit is first-rate...where's your pince-nez?

JOHN. I can't get to grips with it.

RUDYARD. Well you must. They give a man a different expression as compared to spectacles.

JOHN. It won't stay on my nose.

RUDYARD. Have you got it about you?

JOHN. I think so.

RUDYARD. Well, let's have a look—Pop it on.

JOHN. I don't want to wear it.

RUDYARD. Jack, we need the overall impression. Pop it on please.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Before Jack meets with doctors from the Army Medical Board to assess whether he is fit to join the army for World War I, Rudyard looks him over, making sure that his son looks dignified and impressive. This scene introduces the audience to Rudyard's tendency to micromanage Jack, especially since he makes a big deal of whether or not Jack wears a pince-nez. The difference between a pince-nez and a pair of regular glasses is simply that a pince-nez doesn't have the pieces that rest on the ears. This, of course, means that a pince-nez is much more likely to slip off the nose, which is exactly what Jack complains about. But Rudyard doesn't pay attention to Jack's concern, instead fixating on the thought that a "pince-nez" creates "a different expression" than regular glasses.

The implication here is that Rudyard believes that sophisticated, respectable men don't wear glasses. Rudyard doesn't care if the pince-nez is impractical; he just wants Jack to impress the army doctors. He therefore ignores Jack's own wishes, forcing him to wear a pince-nez even though it's an obvious inconvenience. This behavior shows on the one hand how eager Rudyard is to get Jack into the army, and how much he believes in the importance of serving in the army to fight for England. At the same time, it shows how Rudyard's devotion to his ideals is so strong that he ignores what his son actually wants because he thinks he knows what's best for the boy.

RUDYARD. Of course we don't have to...it's not for my benefit.

JOHN. Oh don't be like that Daddo. Let's do it then. Ask me a question.

RUDYARD. Not if you don't think it's going to help.

JOHN. I do, I do. Please ask me.

RUDYARD. I think it'll be useful.

JOHN. It will.

RUDYARD. I'm not doing this for fun. It's for your sake.

JOHN. I know.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place after Rudyard suggests that he and Jack should rehearse some of the questions the army doctors might ask. When Jack is hesitant to go along, Rudyard acts offended and pretends not to care. "Of course we don't have to...," he says, "it's not for my benefit." Although Rudyard's response is technically true (since Rudyard isn't the one trying to enlist in the army), it's not hard to see that Rudyard cares about Jack's military career as much—if not more—than Jack himself. In other words, it really *is* for Rudyard's "benefit" that Jack practice his answers, and Rudyard's effort to say that it is for Jack's benefit is in actuality a way to guilt trip Jack into doing just what Rudyard wants.

The rest of the play will explore this tension between what Rudyard thinks is best for Jack and what Jack actually wants for himself. Simply put, Rudyard has high expectations that Jack will have a successful and honorable military career. Though he'd like to think that he's urging Jack toward the army because this is what's best for the boy, it's obvious that Rudyard's own ego is wrapped up in the idea of having a respected military officer as a son, and his ideals are driving him to make sure that Jack fights in the war for England. Jack himself clearly recognizes that his father has already decided what is "best" for him and is pushing him without

regard to what Jack might want.

JOHN. I can't see how this will make any difference to my chances. If the Army is desperate for recruits they won't mind a pair of specs.

RUDYARD. Jack, the Navy has already rejected you once. Your eyes are a serious stumbling block. Your performance this afternoon is very important, and the first impression you give is vital. You've got to take a big pull on yourself and really dig out.

JOHN. I'm doing my best Daddo. I won't let you down.

Related Characters: John "Jack" Kipling , Rudyard Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

As Jack rehearses what he plans to say to the army doctors, the pince-nez repeatedly slips off his nose and distracts him. Frustrated, he tells Rudyard that he doesn't understand why he needs the pince-nez in the first place, since the military is "desperate for recruits," ultimately suggesting that they won't care about superficial things like whether a prospective soldier wears a pince-nez or regular glasses. Jack's objection hints at Rudyard's absurd fixation on Jack's appearance, and therefore also at Rudyard's general sense of the importance of appearing to be a man of distinction and high class.

Rudyard, however, believes that Jack has to take this meeting with the army doctors as seriously as possible. And because Jack's poor eyesight is a "serious stumbling block" when it comes to getting him into the military, he has to do everything he can to distract from the fact that he's too nearsighted to function without eyewear. What Rudyard doesn't acknowledge, though, is that it probably won't make a difference if Jack wears regular glasses—instead, he believes that the pince-nez will make Jack look formidable, so he forces Jack to wear it. The problem, of course, is that the pince-nez is a major inconvenience to Jack, making it harder for him to speak confidently about why he wants to join the army. But Rudyard doesn't think about this, instead spending all his energy pressuring Jack to dress and behave in a certain way. By forcing Jack to do this, Rudyard reveals his own domineering parenting style.

CARRIE. He's too young.

RUDYARD. He is not a boy, he is a young man. If you continue to pamper and paw him, you will turn him into something altogether weak and watery…the next few hours will be a serious point in his career.

CARRIE. Do you think it's fair to encourage him?

RUDYARD. I would think it very unfair if I didn't. Within a year, by the end of 1914, we shall be fighting for civilisation itself, one wouldn't want him to miss an opportunity to be part of that.

Related Characters: Carrie Kipling, Rudyard Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Carrie and Rudyard discuss whether or not Jack is too young to join the military. Carrie tries to make Rudyard see that he's exerting too much pressure on the boy, who is still just a teenager. But Rudyard refuses to see it this way, instead thinking only about how best to turn Jack into a tough, honorable man.

When Rudyard says that Jack will become "weak and watery" if Carrie continues to "pamper" him, he implies that Carrie is overattentive and that this will make Jack too sensitive. The idea here is that—according to Rudyard—young men ought to be strong and brave, and Jack is no exception. Rudyard's conception of the importance of masculine strength, and just what constitutes masculine strength, drives him to push his son to enlist.

Rudyard's desire for Jack to enlist are also based on Rudyard's ideals about England and the British Empire. He sees the coming war as so important that to keep someone out of the war would be to deprive him of a defining moment of his generation and of civilization itself. Note, though, the way that Rudyard here thinks of serving in the war only as an "opportunity." He doesn't think at all of the dangers or horrors of war. His understanding of war is entirely abstract, focused on the preservation of ideals and of the opportunity to gain glory. He thinks that keeping Jack *out* of the army would be foolish, as if he and Carrie have a responsibility as parents to make sure their son honorably defends England. This emphasizes the way Rudyard's thoughts about duty and honor impact his parenting, as he holds Jack to high standards because of his own idealistic beliefs.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

SPARKS. […] this is very severe myopia ...we couldn't possibly… (*He turns to* POTTLE *for help.*)

POTTLE. Not possibly. There are very strict guidelines.

SPARKS. I think [Pottle] would agree, we were prepared to, um, stretch a point…very keen to stretch a point, but…

POTTLE. There has to be a limit.

SPARKS. I'm sure you understand.

RUDYARD. Yes I understand, but his spectacles are extremely effective.

SPARKS. But if he should lose them he'd be a danger to himself.

POTTLE. And to his men.

Related Characters: Major Sparks, Colonel Pottle (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling , Rudyard Kipling

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the army doctor, Major Sparks, discovers that Jack is so nearsighted that he can't even read the top line of letters on a vision test. Until this moment, Sparks has done everything he can to impress Rudyard, since he's a huge fan of Rudyard's writing. Now, though, he has to deliver the news that Jack can't join the army because of his "severe myopia" (nearsightedness).

When Sparks notes that he and Pottle were "prepared" to "stretch a point," he implies that they were ready to make an exception on Jack's behalf, since he's Rudyard's son. They would have let Jack into the army based on nothing but the fact that he's a famous writer's son—if, of course, his eyesight was at least a *little* better. Being admitted into the army in such a way would not have been a particularly honorable, since most people don't have such sway. Given that Rudyard is so adamant about honor and respectability, it'd be reasonable to assume that he wouldn't want his son to benefit from his own fame in dishonorable ways. However, Rudyard is upset that Sparks and Pottle won't bend the rules for Jack. He even tries to argue that Jack's glasses will help him see, abandoning his pretentious ideas about the pince-nez in order to help his son's case. But Sparks and Pottle hold their ground, pointing out that Jack would be a liability to his fellow soldiers—a point that *should* resonate with Rudyard, since it has to do with the kind of soldierly responsibility he so often praises. In this moment, then, Rudyard comes off as something of a hypocrite.

What this scene makes even more clear is the way that Rudyard's ego and ideals get in the way of his ability to see reality. The doctors want to try to make an exception for Jack, but even they feel that to do so in this case would be dangerous to both Jack and others. Rudyard, though, can't accept such thinking, which also means he doesn't actually understand the true danger of war.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

JOHN. Do you ever long to…

ELSIE. What?

JOHN. No.

ELSIE. What?

JOHN. Doesn't matter.

ELSIE. Say it.

JOHN. …Be someone else for a while. Or, rather, be yourself for a while, that's what I really mean. Sounds like the opposite, but in fact it's the same thing.

Related Characters: John "Jack" Kipling (speaker), Elsie "Bird" Kipling, Rudyard Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Jack and his sister Elsie takes place not long after Jack has been turned away from the army because of his nearsightedness. Standing in the drawing room of their family's house, Jack opens up to his sister about what it's like to deal with the pressure Rudyard constantly puts on him.

When Jack implies that he wishes he could "be someone else for a while," it becomes clear that he wants to escape the domineering influence that Rudyard has over him. In fact, it's not just that he wants to be "someone else," it's that he wants to be *himself*. The fact that to Jack it would feel like "the same thing" to be himself as to be someone else makes clear the degree to which Jack is completely out of touch with his own identity. Constantly having to deal with his father's expectations—to be the son his father wants him to be—he has had no room to become his own person. Therefore, the mere idea of being himself is strange to him, since he doesn't even really know who he is or—rather—who he'd be if he had the chance to live on his

own terms.

JOHN (*furious*). Oh, shut up. I don't care whether it's sensible or not, or dangerous or not, I don't give a damn as long as I get away, and get out of this house.

ELSIE. Ssh...Jack...

JOHN. I can't bear it.

ELSIE. Jack.

JOHN. I hate it. You don't understand.

ELSIE. I do.

JOHN. No you don't. Sometimes it makes me ill. It does. I get so upset, I actually feel sick. And I can't breathe in. I can't make myself take a breath. It's suffocating. [...]

Related Characters: John "Jack" Kipling (speaker), Elsie "Bird" Kipling, Rudyard Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Jack tells Elsie that he wants to join the army not because he cares about defending his country, but because he wants to get away from home. Elsie finds this ridiculous, since joining the army will put Jack in harm's way, but Jack doesn't "care whether it's sensible or not, or dangerous or not"—either way, he's going to try his hardest just to escape his daily life at home.

Jack's desire to leave home no matter the danger it entails spotlights just how overwhelming Rudyard's controlling style of parenting is. For Jack, the possibility of death on the battlefield is more tolerable than the prospect of sticking around and having to deal with his father's domineering ways. Jack, in fact, describes living at home as being equally dangerous for him. As Jack describes it, Rudyard's parenting doesn't just stifle him. Rather, it makes him feel ill, it makes him unable to breathe. That Jack already feels like he is suffering under his father's expectations makes the prospect of facing danger in the army less frightening.

Of course, it's reasonable to believe that Jack wouldn't think this way if he had actually experienced the horrors of war. As an abstract idea, though, the thought of charging onto a battlefield seems better than navigating Rudyard's overwhelming expectations.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

RUDYARD. Ladies and Gentlemen. We are a people who have never known invasion, have never known the shame of seeing a foreign army on our soil. A people whose soul is as strong and as old as the English oak, and as constant as the brook that cuts deep into the soft valley soil.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Rudyard says these lines in a speech to convince people to enlist in the military. World War I has just officially begun, and he's adamant that everyone who can defend England should sign up to fight. To make his point, he proudly reminds his listeners that England has never been successfully overtaken by a "foreign army" (this historical point is dubious, though the point isn't worth debating here). Rudyard suggests that any such invasion would be "shame[ful]," implying that British people should take pride in the fact that their country has remained so powerful for so long. Indeed, he frames England as a "strong" country with a rich history and "soul." His comparison to an oak tree indicates that England has deep roots that can't just be torn up. Similarly, he says that the "soul" of the country is as "constant" as a flowing river—a simile that highlights Britain's vitality and its continuous flow of power, since England has maintained its strength for centuries.

Because of this history, Rudyard thinks any kind of foreign influence would be a travesty, destroying Britain's long history and changing its overall way of life. The viewpoint Rudyard expresses here provides insight into why he is so adamant about young men like Jack joining the military: he truly believes there's nothing more important than protecting England.

They will teach our bricklayers to lay bricks the German way. They will instruct our farmers to use larger fields and cut down the hedges. They will tell us what to eat and how to eat it, what to mine and how to mine it, what to say and when to say it. Our towns will be re-named, and every book, newspaper, map, and signpost will be written in German first, English second. And in your corner shop when you buy your ounce of German tobacco, you will pay, not in pounds, shillings, and pence, but in German marks. And yet this government still supports a system of voluntary service.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Rudyard speaks these words in his army recruitment speech, trying to convince his listeners to join the military to make sure the Germans aren't able to overtake England. To stress the importance of beating back the Germans, Rudyard tries to scare British citizens by talking about all the changes that would take place if Germany successfully conquered the country. The examples he chooses, though, are somewhat humorous, since they are—in the grand scheme of things—not so terrible. After all, it wouldn't be *that* big of a deal if people had to pay for tobacco using German marks instead of English pounds!

That the idea *does* seems to terrify Rudyard shows just how much he values English culture and wants to protect it. Given that Rudyard is so bothered by relatively little things—like the prospect of having to eat German food instead of British food—it's not all that surprising that he's willing to put his son in danger in order to protect the country. In other words, he is so patriotic and devoted to the British lifestyle and culture that he believes in making great sacrifices to preserve everything he loves about England.

> But there is of course a pernicious minority who do not intend to inconvenience themselves for any consideration.

We must demand that every fit young man come forward to enlist. And that every young man who chooses to remain at home, be shunned by his community.

Only our unity, our strength, and our courage can save us from destruction.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are how Rudyard ends the speech he makes to encourage British citizens to enlist in the military and fight in World War I. Having listed all the ways England would change if Germany conquered it, he turns his attention to the fact that some people aren't willing to "inconvenience themselves" in the name of protecting the country. As Rudyard sees it, defending England is a profound responsibility, and refusing to accept this responsibility would be shameful and despicable. In fact, he believes that anyone not taking up this responsibility should be essentially shunned. Fighting for England, in Rudyard's mind, is a prerequisite for being a part of English society. It is this patriotic mindset that Rudyard he applies to his own son, as he refuses to entertain the idea of Jack *not* joining the army.

Note, though, how Rudyard describes those who don't want to enlist as doing so because they don't want to be "inconvenienced." In using this word, Rudyard minimizes the actual horror or devastation of war. As he describes it, fighting in the war is just a kind of bump on in the road that people should be willing to endure. But, in fact, World War I, with its new technology and trench warfare, turned out to be profoundly devastating and brutal for the soldiers who endured it, and many soldiers who did enlist and fight came to the conclusion that they had been lied to and betrayed by the patriotic call to arms that pushed them into the war. Wilfred Owen's World War I poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is, in part, a profound denunciation of the sorts of sentiments that Rudyard displays in these lines. While Rudyard displays a profoundly idealistic patriotism in these lines, he also displays a completely abstract understanding of war that, because of that idealism and patriotism, overlooks and dismisses the true horror into which these soldiers will soon be sent.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

> RUDYARD. Listen to me! A family of nations. And Britain, as parents—Mother and Father, has an absolute duty to protect its children, and some of the children are self-sufficient young adults, and need only a nudge in one direction or the other. But some are still bawling, inarticulate, aggressive kids, who need all the help and direction we can offer. But it is a family. And it is our responsibility as parents to feed, to educate, to guide, to maintain our children's quality of life.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker), Elsie "Bird" Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Rudyard says these liens to Elsie in a conversation about the

importance of fighting to protect England and its powerful position in the world. Rudyard strongly believes in the British Empire. He believes that, through its colonialist empire, England has created a "family of nations." More specifically, he thinks of England as the "parents" of this "family," meaning that it has a responsibility to support and guide the many places it has colonized.

These views are consistent with Rudyard Kipling's actual beliefs in real life, since Kipling was a big supporter of not just the British Empire, but the entire idea of colonialism. He took the patronizing and racist view that established nations like England or even the United States had a duty to colonize and enlighten less developed areas of the world. And he viewed the people of those colonized places—mostly black, brown, and Asian people—as being like "bawling, inarticulate, aggressive kids" who can't survive on their own.

Although the play doesn't directly acknowledge the racist implications of this statement, Kipling wrote a poem (in real life) called "The White Man's Burden," in which he argues that white people have a responsibility to civilize communities of color by conquering them and showing them how to live (yikes!). His suggestion in the play that England needs "to feed, to educate, [and] to guide" its "children" hints at this racist outlook.

In the context of *My Boy Jack*, though, Rudyard's belief in the unalloyed goodness and importance of the British Empire explains his belief in the necessity of fighting for it, and his blindness in seeing the realities of what fighting for it might entail.

ELSIE. And to make money.

RUDYARD. Of course! That's absolutely right. That's why our empire is uniquely successful. We have managed to combine benevolence and commerce. No-one has done it before. Not only are our children better off spiritually but they are better off materially. From Canada to Australia, from Africa to India, the world is a better place, a safer place, a more comfortable place than it was a hundred years ago.

Related Characters: Elsie "Bird" Kipling, Rudyard Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Elsie challenges Rudyard's strong commitment to the British Empire. She does this by pointing out that England has colonized so many regions of the world not necessarily to improve the lives of the people living there (as Rudyard has suggested), but to "make money." Her point is rooted in the fact that British colonial power is responsible for quite a bit of England's overall wealth, since expanding to different areas of the world made it possible for England to increase trade-related profits.

Elsie brings this up as a critique, but Rudyard doesn't take the bait. Instead, he excitedly agrees that British colonialism has made the country a lot of money. However, he also argues that the countries England has conquered have *also* financially benefited from the arrangement. This is a highly debatable point, but the mere fact that Rudyard believes it provides insight into why he cares so much about protecting England: he legitimately thinks that British power is good for the world at large. For this reason, he thinks people should do whatever's necessary to protect the country.

RUDYARD (*very quietly*). There is a price we have to pay. There is a risk we all have to take. Jack knows that. Germany will go on killing by all the means in its power. She must either win or bleed to death. Therefore we must continue to pass our children through fire, until somehow we win and destroy her.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker), Elsie "Bird" Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Rudyard says these lines while arguing with Elsie about sending Jack to war. Elsie is incensed that Rudyard found a way to get Jack into the army, since multiple doctors deemed him unfit to serve. She argues that Rudyard has put Jack in extreme danger, since he can't see well enough to properly defend himself.

But Rudyard doesn't dwell on such thoughts. Instead, he focuses on the idea of sacrifice. He believes everyone has to pay a certain "price" in order to protect England. If this means putting Jack in harm's way, Rudyard is willing to do that. The fact that he thinks everyone has to "pass [their] children through fire" further illustrates this point, making it very clear that Rudyard sees Jack's potential death as a necessary sacrifice.

What's interesting, though, is that, at this point in the play, all of his talk about duty and sacrifice is still pretty abstract. Jack has joined the army, but he hasn't yet seen any action. It's therefore relatively easy for Rudyard—who is so full of idealistic and patriotic thoughts—to talk about the possibility of Jack's death.

RUDYARD. Before I married, I lived in the pocket of my true friend, Woolcot. We ate together, we jawed together—about everything, we even wrote together, and then he upped and died of Typhoid. He was twenty-seven, and I was very fond of him. And for a long while I had the general feeling that the world was a wicked place. But you have to take your dose.

JOHN. Do you?

RUDYARD. You sit it out. You wait. Eventually you heal up. I'll tell you something old man, I wish I could be in your shoes now. I wish that I could share with you that clean, honourable task which is ahead of you.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rudyard talks to Jack about facing grief and loss with stoic strength and patience. Jack has just told him that he often thinks about his two friends who have already been killed in World War I, prompting Rudyard to speak empathetically about what it's like to lose a friend. He knows firsthand what this feels like, since his friend Woolcot (most likely a reference to Wolcott Balestier, Kipling's good friend who also happened to be Carrie's brother) died as a young man.

In some ways, this is a touching moment, since Rudyard opens up to his son and acknowledges the pain Jack must be feeling. However, his compassion only lasts for so long, since he soon tells Jack that the only thing to do in the face of emotional hardship is "take your dose." In other words, Rudyard believes that grief is just part of life and that everyone just has to deal with it, swallowing the pain as if it's a "dose" of medicine.

Jack seems skeptical of this idea, but Rudyard insists that "eventually you heal up," urging his son to show resilience and toughness. The fact that he then switches topics by talking about the "honourable task" of military service that Jack has "ahead" of him only emphasizes Rudyard's obsession with the value of fighting for England. Rather than having an honest emotional conversation with his son, then, he once again fixates on his idealistic notions surrounding duty, honor, and strength.

Act 1, Scene 8 Quotes

JOHN. [...] Please God I mustn't let them down. Will I be brave? Will I fail?—Onto the firestep—keep the pistol out of the mud—left hand on the parapet—pull—right foot on the sand bags—push up—left leg over—Straighten—run—I mustn't let them down. Some of these men will be dead tonight. I may be dead tonight. Let me live. Stop raining—just for a second.

Oh Daddo—what luxury—to turn on a hot water tap—hot steaming water—evening clothes—dinner at the Ritz—the Alhambra afterwards. Elsie. Mother. Daddo.—My first action—Fifteen seconds—is that the whistle?—one clear blast—left hand—parapet—sand bags—over—run. Run fast and straight. Please God let me live. Pistol high—run, run, run.

Related Characters: John "Jack" Kipling (speaker), Carrie Kipling, Rudyard Kipling, Elsie "Bird" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Jack is in the middle of the fighting of World War I. Jack delivers this stream-of-consciousness monologue right before he rushes out of the trench and storms enemy lines. As he thinks about keeping his gun out of the mud and remembering what he needs to do, he also thinks about his role as a lieutenant, saying, "Please God I mustn't let them down."

At first, it seems clear that he's referring to the other soldiers when he says "them." However, given that he goes on in the second paragraph of this monologue to think about his family, it's possible that he's actually thinking about not letting *Rudyard* down. Such a compulsion would make sense, considering how much Rudyard has talked to Jack about how important it is for young men to defend England. According to this interpretation, Jack's last moments before storming the battlefield are spent thinking about whether or not he'll live up to his father's expectations—a good indication of just how much these expectations have governed his life.

On a broader level, this part of the play shows how frightening and overwhelming war really is. Rudyard's talk

about the honor and glory of war have always only been in the abstract. Influenced by those abstract ideas, Rudyard pushed his son to enlist. Jack, though, is now experiencing the terrifying reality of war. The scene illustrates what Rudyard is actually asking of his son, and how bling Rudyard himself is to that ask.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ RUDYARD. […] Why should I stop him? If I had, he would have suffered a living death here, ashamed and despised by everyone. Could you bear that? … It's true. How would he hold his head up, whilst his friends risked death in France? How would he walk down the high street, or into a shop? He wouldn't. He would stay indoors, growing weaker and quieter by the day. Unable to leave his room. And he would wish he was dead.

CARRIE. People would understand.

RUDYARD. No they would not. They know what we are fighting for. They know we must go forward, willing to sacrifice everything to deliver mankind from evil.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Carrie Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

After Rudyard and Carrie receive a telegram informing them that Jack has gone missing in action, Carrie asks Rudyard why he urged their son to join the army. Rudyard responds with this defensive justification, insisting that pressuring Jack to go to war was the right thing to do as a parent. He even implies that he was just upholding a certain parental responsibility, since he thinks Jack would be even worse off if he hadn't gone to war—a bold statement, considering that Jack has gone missing in an extremely violent war.

The idea that staying home from the war would be like suffering a "living death" recalls something Rudyard previously said while delivering a recruitment speech: namely, that anyone who doesn't enlist should be "shunned." Rudyard thinks Jack is better off having gone to war, since he clearly believes that nobody would "understand" if he had stayed home. After all, he himself wouldn't have understood, considering his views about shunning people who don't enlist. Even in the face of his son's disappearance on the front and likely death, Rudyard remains staunchly committed to his ideals. Note, also, how his devotion to these ideals keeps him separate and unconnected from his wife.

❝ CARRIE. Yes that's very fine. But will you believe that tomorrow? Today is the last day you can believe that.

RUDYARD. Carrie, if by any chance Jack is dead, it will have been the finest moment in his young life. We would not wish him to outlive that.

CARRIE. You don't believe that Rud. I know you don't. There is no need to say that to me.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Carrie Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Carrie questions whether or not Rudyard will be able to hold onto his idealistic ideas about war and honor if it turns out that Jack has died. They have just learned that he's missing in action, but Rudyard has yet to show any genuine emotion. Instead, he makes sweeping claims about honor, prompting Carrie to challenge the extent to which he actually *believes* the things he says.

But Carrie's point only encourages Rudyard to take his romanticized ideas about duty and honor even further, as he claims that if Jack is dead, his death "will have been the finest moment in his young life." In and of itself, this is a pretty extreme thing to say, since it tries to paint Jack's (possible) death in a positive light. Even more idealistic, though, is Rudyard's suggestion that he and Carrie should "not wish [Jack] to outlive" his chance to die for his country. The idea here is that sacrificing oneself for England is the most honorable thing imaginable. But to really believe this, Rudyard has to be okay with the death of his own son. When Carrie insists that Rudyard can't actually believe what he is saying, she is saying that he can't possibly hold his ideals as being more important than their son's life. She is also saying that it's easy enough for him to say such a thing now, when Jack is simply missing and not necessarily dead, but it'll be another thing entirely for him to stick to this belief if it turns out that Jack has actually died.

RUDYARD. No sacrifice...is too great...no sacrifice, however painful, is too great...if we win the day...

ELSIE (*angry and upset*). You've missed the point haven't you? God! You just...You've no idea. God!

Silence. RUDYARD *and* CARRIE *are helpless*.

Don't you realise, he didn't give a damn about your cause? The reason he went to France, the reason he went to get his head shot off, was to get away from us! He couldn't bear us any more.

Short silence.

The suffocation, the love, the expectation. That's why he went.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Elsie "Bird" Kipling (speaker), Carrie Kipling, John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

When Elsie learns that Jack has gone missing, she admonishes her father for pressuring him to join the army. In keeping with his idealistic belief in the importance of duty, Rudyard argues that "no sacrifice" is "too great" when it comes to defending England. Rudyard's halting delivery suggests that he is struggling even as he makes these points, and that in fact he is clutching to these idealistic claims as a way to protect himself.

Elsie, however, recognizes that Rudyard is using these platitudes to distract himself from actually facing the likely death of his son. When she says that he has missed the point, what she means in part is that Rudyard has focused on the wrong thing— that his grand ideas about honor have kept him from actually thinking about Jack's life. But what she also means is that Rudyard's idealism is simplistic, and that it caused him to misunderstand Jack's actual motivations. Rudyard thinks that Jack shared his idealism about fighting for England. Elsie her reveals the truth—that Jack went both to escape Rudyard's overbearing love and expectations and because he couldn't do anything other than try to live up to that love and those expectations. Jack went to war and likely died not because of his own ideals, but because of his father's.

What Elsie says in this moment is brutally honest and undoubtedly hurtful to Rudyard. And yet, she includes the word "love" in her list of things Jack wanted to escape, suggesting that, although Rudyard overwhelmed Jack, he did so out of a sense of love and affection—even if that affection was ultimately misguided.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

RUDYARD. How did he seem?

BOWE. What do you mean?

RUDYARD. Well, was he calm or...excited or...nervous...?

BOWE. He was fine, you know, jus' fine.

RUDYARD. Did he seem...pleased to be there?

BOWE. Pleased? No-one's pleased to be there. He was fine. He told us we had to go on.

RUDYARD. Did he?

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Guardsman Bowe (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place while Guardsman Bowe tells the Kipling family what happened to Jack in his last moments during the war. Although Rudyard is obviously eager to learn what became of his son, he interrupts Bowe to ask about Jack's behavior on the battlefield. Even in this moment, Rudyard continues to obsess over the kind of man he wants Jack to be—he clearly hopes to learn from Bowe that Jack was a courageous and honorable soldier, which is why he wonders if Jack was "pleased to be" on the battlefield.

Bowe's response reveals the absurdity of Rudyard's ideas. As Bowe points out, *nobody* is *ever* "pleased" to be at war. That Rudyard wants Jack to be "pleased" makes clear that Rudyard continues to be motivated (and blinded) by his ideals. He wants Jack to see defending his country as a great honor because he wants Jack to share his ideals, and to show what Rudyard considers to be honorable behavior. He also, the play implies, wants Jack to be "pleased" because if Jack was pleased to be in the war, then Rudyard is not at fault for Jack's death.

Rudyard seems interested when Bowe says that Jack told his men they had to "go on" after reaching enemy lines because it suggests to him that Jack was courageous and unrelenting, showing the exact kind of grit and integrity that Rudyard always hoped his son would embody.

RUDYARD (quietly). Thank you…so…he was killed by a shell…during an attack on 'Puits Bis I4'. He led his men from the front, and was courageous in the face of considerable enemy fire.

BOWE. He was. Yes sir. Very courageous.

RUDYARD. Thank you.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Guardsman Bowe (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

After Guardsman Bowe tells the Kipling family that Jack was killed by an enemy shell after reaching the German trenches, Rudyard thanks him for the information. He doesn't forgive Bowe for leaving Jack in the trenches, but he also doesn't lose his composure. The fact that he thanks Bowe suggests that, at the very least, Rudyard is grateful to have some sense of closure surrounding Jack's disappearance.

What makes Rudyard feel even better, though, is the idea that Jack was "courageous in the face of considerable enemy fire." This, it seems, is why he repeats what Bowe has just told the family—he wants to reiterate that Jack died an honorable death. Not only did he die in battle, but died attacking "Puits Bis 14," a huge enemy machine-gun post. Whereas people like Bowe and McHugh wanted to turn around, Jack insisted on charging forward, which indicates that his sense of soldierly duty was strong. Given that Rudyard has spent so much time hammering home the importance of such patriotic and soldierly responsibility, it makes perfect sense that he'd find this information somewhat comforting, even if it doesn't change the fact that his son is dead.

RUDYARD. […] By all accounts he was very brave.

Silence.

He didn't have a long time in the trenches. But he had his heart's desire. So few of us have the opportunity to play our part. Properly. But he did. He worked like the devil. It's a shame that all the effort should end in one afternoon, but he achieved what he set out to achieve. It was a short life, but in a sense complete. I'm happy for him, and proud of him, aren't you?

[…]

CARRIE. I'm so relieved that you see the death of our only son as such a positive and uplifting event. I am sincerely relieved that you are at ease with it all.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Carrie Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

When Guardsman Bowe leaves after having told the Kipling family about Jack's death, Rudyard goes on about how honorable his son's death was. When he says, "So few of us have the opportunity to play our part," he presents Jack's death on the battlefield as a privilege of sorts. Instead of seeing his death as a tragic loss, he tries to view it as a positive thing, implying that dying at war made Jack's life "complete." Rudyard is suggesting here that sacrificing oneself for a greater cause lends purpose to a person's life—an idea also helps Rudyard find meaning in the otherwise senseless tragedy of losing Jack.

And yet, Carrie challenges Rudyard's entire viewpoint by sarcastically saying that she's happy Rudyard sees Jack's death as a "positive and uplifting event." Carrie's angry response cuts straight through all of Rudyard's romanticized ideas about the glory of dying for a greater cause, reminding her husband—and, in turn, the audience—that none of these beliefs will change the fact that Jack was horribly injured and then killed, alone and terrified, in an enemy trench.

RUDYARD. […] I find it a great comfort that so many are in our position, don't you? It is a common agony. A common sacrifice.

CARRE. No I don't find that comforting. I don't care how many people it's happened to. That doesn't help me at all. Not at all…no.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling, Carrie Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

As Rudyard and Carrie talk about Jack's death, Rudyard tries hard to maintain his positivity, once again calling upon his glorified ideas about the value of patriotic sacrifice. By telling Carrie that he finds "great comfort" in the fact that so many other English families have experienced the same tragedy, he tries to place Jack's death in the context of the entire country's struggle. Rudyard here is making another attempt to find meaning in his son's death, as he clings to the notion that losing a son in the war is a "common sacrifice"—a sacrifice many people have made and that was necessary for the country at large. Rudyard sent his son to war on the grounds that young and healthy men had to sacrifice in order to save England. Now that his son has died, he is saying that he himself had to sacrifice to save England, and that living with Jack's death was that sacrifice.

In one sense, of course, Rudyard is right: hundreds of thousands of British families experienced the horror of losing a son in World War I. But Carrie challenges the notion that this is a comforting thought by saying, "That doesn't help me at all." Carrie once again casts doubt on Rudyard's patriotic outlook, which is actually pretty depressing—after all, why would it be *comforting* that so many young British men have died in the war? Further, Carrie is saying that no amount of similar suffering by others can change the fact that she herself has lost her only son. Once again, while Rudyard looks for comfort in abstractions, Carrie insists on facing their own very specific and personal tragedy.

CARRIE. […] Your cruelty doesn't surprise me. You are a cold fish, a very cold fish. But that's alright, I know that now. It doesn't hurt me, but don't pretend anymore. Jack was eighteen years and six weeks old. He died in the rain, he couldn't see a thing, he was alone, in pain, you can't persuade me there is any glory in that.

RUDYARD. I believe there is.

[…]

I must 'believe' in order to survive at all.

Related Characters: Carrie Kipling, Rudyard Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Carrie voices her resentment about the fact that Rudyard had such an unemotional response to Jack's death. By calling him a "cold fish," she suggests that he has numbed himself to any kind of genuine emotion or has never been able to feel any such emotion. And though she claims that his lack of emotion no longer "hurt[s]" her, that claim seems unlikely, given that she tries to get Rudyard to see that there's no "glory" in Jack's death.

To that end, she spells out the exact circumstances of their son's final moments in the trenches and, unlike Rudyard, she doesn't romanticize the scene. Whereas Rudyard has already talked about how honorable it was that Jack died while leading his men into enemy fire, Carrie simply states the facts: Jack lived an extremely short life and died a gruesome, painful death in the rain. She doesn't sugarcoat what happened, instead facing the tragedy of this situation head-on.

Rudyard, on the other hand, appears unable to do this. In fact, he says that he *has* to "believe" that Jack's death was honorable "in order to survive at all." In this crucial moment, Rudyard recognizes that his idealistic notions about war and courage are the only things keeping him from completely breaking down. As such, it becomes clear that—at least in this moment—his romanticized views about sacrifice are little more than an emotional defense mechanism.

CARRIE. But I miss him.

RUDYARD. So do I.

He drops his head and cries. Silence. CARRIE *walks to the desk and looks at the diary.*

CARRIE. […] I feel…more dead than alive. When Josephine died, part of me died with her. But I sewed up the wound. I recovered, to a degree. But now I feel…more…dead than alive.

RUDYARD. We'll manage.

Related Characters: Carrie Kipling, Rudyard Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

This is a pivotal moment in the play, because it's the only time Rudyard shows true emotion. It's significant that this happens after he plainly states that he misses Jack. Until now, he has kept his emotions at bay by focusing on things like honor, duty, and sacrifice—abstract ideas that, though he seems to truly believe in them, won't change the fact that he'll never see his son again. They are ideas that, to Rudyard, give his son's life and death meaning, but they won't allow him to actually talk with or be with his son. When Rudyard admits that he misses Jack, he is admitting that he misses the living, breathing person who was his son—a person, not some abstract idea. This is why simply admitting that he misses Jack has such an impact on him: his grand ideas about war and responsibility can't protect him from the raw emotion of wanting to see his son one more time or hear his voice again.

This scene is also the only moment in the play that Rudyard and Carrie connect with each other on an emotional level. Normally, Carrie either remains quiet while Rudyard talks about his romanticized ideas, or she *challenges* those ideas. Now, though, she succeeds in getting through to Rudyard by setting aside his lofty considerations of bravery and straightforwardly expressing how much she misses Jack.

However, though the two parents bond in their grief, the connection doesn't last very long. Rudyard quickly tries to once again to show a stiff upper lip. "We'll manage," he tells Carrie, insisting that they'll find a way to move on from this tragedy. But "managing" seems like a fairly shallow existence, and while Rudyard seems to think he is projecting strength his comment seems instead to communicate a kind of fundamental emotional emptiness. Instead of allowing himself to dwell in sadness with his wife, he tries to be resilient and strong, thus cutting short a rare moment of emotional companionship. He once again puts his simplistic ideals about masculine strength before his emotion, and the play suggests he is all the worse for it.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

"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 the son you bore
And gave to that wind blowing and that tide.

Related Characters: Rudyard Kipling (speaker), John "Jack" Kipling

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Rudyard reads this poem aloud at the very end of the play, when he's an old man and many years have passed since Jack's death. The lines are taken from a real poem called "My Boy Jack," which Rudyard Kipling published in 1916—a year after his son, John, died in World War I. Although the play insinuates that Rudyard wrote this poem for his son, it's unclear whether or not this was actually the case in real life, since the poem appeared at the beginning of a story about an entirely different battle than the one that claimed John Kipling's life (there's also some disagreement about whether John Kipling was really ever referred to as "Jack").

In the context of the play, though, the poem makes for a poignant ending that shows how Rudyard's ideas about integrity and honor exist alongside—and in tension with—his personal grief. The poem features two speakers. In the opening stanzas, the first speaker wants to know if the other speaker has heard news of his son, Jack, and whether or not he's all right. The second speaker hasn't had any news of Jack, so the first speaker asks "what comfort" he could possibly find in life, if his son is still missing (or dead). The second speaker gives a bleak answer: there *is* no "comfort" to be had in this life. Except, that is, for the simple knowledge that Jack "did not shame his kind." This sentiment is very much in line with Rudyard's ideas about honor, suggesting that the only solace he can take in losing Jack is that his son was brave and full of integrity. For this reason, the poem suggests that Rudyard can "hold [his] head up," knowing that he raised ("bore") an honorable man who sacrificed himself for the greater good.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Rudyard Kipling hums to himself in the drawing room of his home in Sussex, surrounded by bookshelves, cabinets, and a painting of his young daughter. When his son, Jack, enters wearing a suit, Rudyard looks him over approvingly, remarking that he looks quite fine—except that he's not wearing his **pince-nez**. Jack explains that the pince-nez never stays on his nose, which is why he'd much rather wear glasses. But his father forbids this, believing in the importance of first impressions. Wearing a pince-nez, Rudyard insists, will impress the men they're about to visit.

Right away, it becomes clear that Rudyard wants to micromanage his son's life. He pays scrupulous attention to Jack's physical appearance, forcing him to wear a pince-nez (glasses without the earpieces) because he wants to meticulously curate the way Jack looks. It's not yet clear why *Jack needs to look so sharp today, but Rudyard's focus on making him seem presentable is apparent all the same. What's more, the fact that the pince-nez keeps falling off Jack's nose subtly symbolizes the ways in which Rudyard's fatherly pressure only makes Jack's life more difficult.*

Fussing over his son's appearance, Rudyard also suggests that Jack brush his hair back because he has a large forehead—a sign of intelligence. He then explains that Jack will meet with an army doctor and another military official. As his father says this, Jack brushes his hair back and stands up straight, his chin held high to keep **the pince-nez** from slipping off his nose. This pose pleases his father immensely.

As Jack prepares to meet with army doctors, he has to deal with his father's overbearing suggestions about how to make himself look formidable and impressive. This moment is lightly humorous, especially since Rudyard is so pleased by Jack's impeccable posture. In reality, though, the only reason Jack stands like this is to balance the pince-nez—which, of course, Rudyard has forced him to wear. While Rudyard thinks his son is responding well to his parental guidance, then, Jack is actually struggling under the pressure of his father's intense expectations.

Rudyard suggests that he and Jack do a little rehearsal, with him asking Jack a few questions the army officials might pose. Jack's hesitance to play along frustrates Rudyard, who reminds him that this is for Jack's benefit, not his own. Rudyard isn't just doing this to entertain himself, after all. When Jack agrees to rehearse his answers, Rudyard asks him why he wants to join the army. But Jack stumbles over his words, having trouble remembering what he should say.

In this moment, the reason Rudyard makes such a fuss over Jack's appearance becomes clear: his meeting that day will determine if he can join the army. Although Rudyard claims that he's helping his son for Jack's own sake, his level of investment in the way Jack looks and acts suggests that this isn't necessarily the case. Rather, it seems likely that Rudyard wants Jack to join the army just as much—or perhaps even more—than Jack himself, perhaps liking the idea of having a courageous, honorable son in the military.

As Jack hesitantly tries to explain why he wants to join the army, Rudyard helps him along with a few guiding words. He gently nudges Jack into saying that he wants to help "preserve" England's way of life, but Jack stops short of finishing this thought because **the pince-nez** falls off his nose. Frustrated with the pince-nez, he tries to convince Rudyard to let him wear his glasses, but his father reminds him that the navy has already rejected him because of his poor eyesight. For this reason, it's important that Jack make a good impression at his meeting with the army officials today. He has to really give this meeting his all.

Rudyard's obsession with the pince-nez starts to make a little more sense, as it's revealed that Jack was rejected by the navy because he has trouble seeing without glasses. And yet, wearing a pince-nez won't change the fact that Jack can't see without eyewear. The only difference is that Rudyard thinks a pince-nez is more dignified and impressive than normal glasses. Ironically, a pince-nez is much less practical when it comes to military combat, since regular glasses are much more likely to stay on Jack's face in the heat of the moment. This just illustrates the way Rudyard's expectations for Jack are out of touch with reality, since he prioritizes silly ideas about respectability and dignity over what actually makes sense for Jack. Rudyard's coaching of Jack also reveals a hint of his patriotic ideals ("preserving[]" the English way of life) which, again, don't necessarily align with Jack's values.

With **the pince-nez** back on his face, Jack once again tries to say why he wants to join the army. But the pince-nez falls yet again, and this time he really loses his patience, yelling that he simply can't do this. He has done his absolute best and just can't get through this while wearing the pince-nez. Rudyard strongly disagrees, but he doesn't have time to convince his son because Carrie, his wife, enters the drawing room and urges Rudyard to be easier on him.

Jack's frustration hints at the tension in his relationship with his father. Although he obediently goes along with his father's demands, it's clear that he has some internal frustration that just keeps building and building—until, of course, he can't take it anymore and yells out in anger. In other words, the parental pressure that Rudyard exerts just stresses Jack out and makes it harder for him to do simple things—like, for example, state why he wants to join the army.

Carrie changes the flowers underneath the painting on the wall. Rudyard tells her to leave, since he and Jack are in the middle of something, but Carrie can sense that Jack is upset. When she asks if he's all right, though, he pretends nothing's wrong. Still, Carrie says he shouldn't volunteer for the army just to please his father and her. He has ample time to decide if he really wants to become a soldier. Jack, however, assures her that he has already made his decision. Plus, Rudyard disagrees that Jack has time. According to him, Jack should join the army as soon as possible, even though he's not quite 16.

Rudyard and Carrie have opposing viewpoints. Rudyard, for his part, wants Jack to rush into the army as soon as possible. But Carrie is hesitant to pressure Jack into doing something he doesn't want to. Of course, it's not clear if Carrie's concern actually has to do with what Jack himself wants, or if she just doesn't want him to join the army because she's afraid he'll get hurt. Either way, Jack finds himself pulled between his two parents as they argue about what's best for him.

Jack isn't a boy anymore, Rudyard argues. Carrie shouldn't keep treating him like a child, as this will just turn him into a weakling. Nonetheless, Carrie doesn't think they should urge him toward the army, despite Rudyard's belief that they would be bad parents if they *didn't* do this. According to him, in one year—when it's 1914—England will be fighting to preserve "civilisation itself," and keeping Jack from contributing to this effort would be a terribly unfair thing to do.

Rudyard makes it clear that he wants Jack to become a strong man, not someone who runs from duty by not joining the military. More importantly, Rudyard reveals that it's currently 1913—one year before the start of World War I. This, it seems, is why Rudyard is so fixated on the importance of defending "civilisation itself": he (correctly) thinks the world is on the cusp of a transformative war. Because of this, he believes that Jack has a responsibility to serve his country and, in doing so, protect civilization's status quo. Moreover, Rudyard sees it as his own parental *responsibility to urge Jack into the army, as if he'd be a bad father if he let Jack stay home at such a pivotal moment in England's history.*

Jack's eyesight is so terrible that navy officials only gave him five minutes of their time before sending him home, refusing to let him enlist. Carrie reminds Rudyard of this, trying to show him that Jack's poor sight isn't something they can ignore. However, Rudyard feels they have to at least *try* to get Jack into the military—Germany will soon make its attack, and he wants Jack to be part of the fighting when it begins. Carrie quickly points out that Jack joining the army is what *Rudyard* wants, not necessarily what Jack wants, but Rudyard dismisses this, insisting that he wants Jack to join for Jack's own "sake." He then sends Carrie out of the room.

Carrie's concerns about Jack joining the army are all quite valid. After all, Jack has already been turned away from military service because of his eyesight, indicating that he's unfit to serve. The fact that this doesn't deter Rudyard emphasizes just how much he believes in the importance of duty, since he's willing to send his son to war even though Jack's poor eyesight would clearly put him in extra danger on the battlefield.

When Carrie leaves, Rudyard tries to encourage his son, telling him to stand strong and keep pursuing his dream of joining the army. Jack, for his part, says he'll try one more time to rehearse what he'll say at the meeting that afternoon, then delivers a perfect little speech about how he wants to fight for his country because Germany has been readying itself for war for years. Unless British citizens step up now, England won't stand a chance. Deeply pleased, Rudyard shakes Jack's hand and congratulates him on a job well done.

In this moment, Jack seems to go along with his father's lofty ideas about the importance of defending England. Although it seems clear that Rudyard has pushed him toward the military, Jack does *appear motivated to join the army. However, it's unclear if he actually believes in the importance of fighting on behalf of England or if he just says this to please his demanding father. Thus, the scene concludes on an ambiguous note.*

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Jack and Rudyard go to the Army Medical Board, where they meet with an army doctor named Major Sparks and another official, Colonel Pottle. Both Sparks and Pottle are eager to talk to Rudyard, since they're both big fans of his writing. Pottle starts talking to Rudyard about cars, impressed that Rudyard drives a Rolls Royce. But Rudyard cuts him off, reminding him that they're here for Jack. Major Sparks jumps to action, telling Jack to strip to his underwear. As the three men turn their backs and wait for Jack to do this, Rudyard happily picks up his conversation with Pottle, telling him about the exact model of Rolls Royce that he drives.

This scene explores Rudyard Kipling's fame. Because he's a well-known author, it's unsurprising that people are eager to talk to him. To his credit, though, he actively tries to avoid overshadowing Jack, wanting Sparks and Pottle to focus their attention on Jack. This suggests that Rudyard truly cares about his son; he's not a selfish father who would rather talk about himself than pay attention to Jack. At the same time, though, the whole reason they're meeting with Sparks and Pottle in the first place is so Jack can join the army, which is what Rudyard *wants. This scene therefore highlights the complexity of Rudyard's style of parenting: he has very high expectations for how Jack should live his life, but this is partly because he genuinely wants what's best for him.*

As Rudyard and Pottle talk about cars, Sparks examines Jack. But soon he joins the conversation, noting that his own son wants a motorcycle. He adds that his son also loved reading Rudyard's book, *The Jungle Book*, at which point Rudyard turns the conversation back to Jack, asking how the examination is going. Sparks turns to Jack, asking if he's read *The Jungle Book*—he hasn't. Sparks then asks Rudyard questions about his writing, finally finishing the physical exam and turning to a record player, which he uses to play a recording of over 1,000 soldiers singing Rudyard's poem "Recessional" to the King of England. He says that he finds this incredibly moving.

Despite Rudyard's efforts to not overshadow Jack, his fame distracts Sparks and Pottle from focusing on anything but Rudyard and his writing. The record that Sparks plays hints at Rudyard's devotion to the British Empire, since the poem "Recessional" sings the praises of the Empire but also laments the possibility that British power might someday fade away. This foreshadows ideas Rudyard will express later in the play—ideas about the importance of sustaining the British Empire and fighting off Germany in World War I, largely to ensure that England preserves its influence throughout the world.

Sparks tells Jack to take his glasses off for a vision test, but Jack quickly notes that his son is wearing a **pince-nez**, *not* glasses. Sparks pays no attention to this distinction, instead asking Jack to read the top line of letters on a poster across the room. Jack says nothing for a moment, then admits he can't see anything. Sparks thinks he's talking about the smaller letters, but soon realizes that Jack can't even read the huge font. He suggests that Jack move closer, so Jack walks all the way across the room and stops with his face extremely close to the poster, at which point he reads the letters. Astounded by the severity of Jack's myopia, Sparks says the army couldn't possibly accept him.

After all of Rudyard's points about how a pince-nez will make Jack look more dignified, Sparks doesn't even register that Jack isn't wearing regular glasses. Rudyard's tendency to micromanage Jack's life is thus for nothing, essentially making things harder for Jack for no good reason. To that end, wearing the pince-nez doesn't do anything to help Jack pass the eye exam. None of Rudyard's efforts could have changed the simple fact that Jack has severe myopia (nearsightedness).

Sparks and Pottle try to explain that there are strict rules about soldiers passing the eye exam. Even so, they were ready to bend the rules out of respect for Rudyard, but Jack's eyesight is *so* bad that they couldn't possibly ignore it. Rudyard insists that Jack can see quite well with his glasses, but Sparks and Pottle point out that he could lose them in battle, in which case he'd be a danger not only to himself, but to his fellow soldiers.

Desperate to convince Sparks and Pottle to let Jack into the army, Rudyard leaves behind his obsession with the pince-nez, eagerly insisting that Jack can see things just fine with his glasses*—not his pince-nez. In this moment, he drops the idea of trying to make Jack seem dignified, instead acknowledging that it's much more practical for a soldier to wear glasses while in battle. Nonetheless, glasses could be lost or damaged on the battlefield. And though Rudyard strongly believes in the idea of responsibility, he ignores the possibility that Jack would put his fellow soldiers in danger if he couldn't see, revealing that his desire for Jack to join the army outweighs all other considerations. It even suggests that he values Jack's army enlistment more highly than his safety.*

Rudyard argues on Jack's behalf, pressuring Sparks and Pottle to make an exception. When this doesn't work, Rudyard chastises Sparks and Pottle for their strictness, saying that this is the exact sort of rigidity that England needs to get rid of in order to stand a chance in the oncoming war. Calling Sparks and Pottle "gutless" and "spineless," he takes his leave, saying that he will be writing to their superiors.

For all of Rudyard's talk about the importance of serving one's country, he's surprisingly harsh to Sparks and Pottle, who are both just carrying out their responsibilities as members of the Army Medical Board. Rather than recognizing that they have a duty to uphold certain standards, he treats them like cowards, ultimately illustrating how badly he wants Jack to join the army—so badly, it seems, that even the most reasonable obstacles enrage him.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

At home that evening, Jack sneaks into the drawing room and takes out a pack of cigarettes he's hidden in a book. He talks to himself as he does this, muttering that he hates this room and that he has had a terrible day. As he harshly imitates his father telling him to "buck up," he realizes his older sister, Elsie, is in the room. Together, they recite a passage from Rudyard's "Just So Stories," then talk about how their father has taken the news that the army turned Jack away. He's upset, Elsie tells Jack, but not necessarily angry at Jack himself. Jack then tells Elsie that he's determined to join the army—one way or another.

This scene is the first time in the play that Jack freely expresses his feelings. Because his father is so overbearing, it's not all that surprising that Jack speaks critically about him. Given Jack's criticism of his father, however, his desire to join the army is unexpected—his ambition, it seems, isn't just to please his father. Rather, Jack legitimately wants to enlist, even if he finds his father's constant encouragement exhausting and domineering.

Jack reveals that he hates living in this house. It's dark and uncomfortable, and he can hardly take it anymore. He asks Elsie if she ever wishes she could just be somebody else. But then he specifies what he means, saying that what he really wants is to just be *himself*, which would, in some ways, be like becoming someone else. He abandons this line of thinking when Elsie admits she doesn't understand what he means.

On a certain level, Jack and Rudyard are on the same page, at least insofar as they both want Jack to join the army. Now, though, it becomes apparent that Jack wants to do join for reasons that have little to do with Rudyard's ideas of honor, duty, and bravery. Indeed, Jack just wants to get away from home. The implication is that Rudyard is so overbearing as a father that Jack feels suffocated. He always has to deal with his father's high expectations, which means he can never just relax and be himself. For this reason, he thinks that being himself would feel like being someone else entirely—an indication of just how stifled he feels by his father.

Elsie doesn't think Jack should join the army, since he has such poor eyesight—it would just be dangerous. He dismisses this, trying to make her see that he doesn't *care* if joining the army is dangerous. He just wants to get away from home. As long as he gets out of the house, he'll be content. Then he won't have to listen to his father constantly encouraging him. He just needs to get away from everyone in his life—a comment that offends Elsie. But Jack assures her he doesn't want to leave her behind, it's simply that he needs space to be himself. When she points out that he doesn't have to join the army to do this, he agrees. And yet, the army would be a good excuse to get away.

Again, Jack indicates that his father's overbearing style of parenting makes him feel as if he can't be himself. In fact, he wants to get away from Rudyard so badly that he's willing to put his life at risk, ignoring the fact that his nearsightedness will make him especially vulnerable on the battlefield. Jack's eagerness to leave suggests that Rudyard's pressure has pushed Jack toward the army for all the wrong reasons.

Jack and Elsie look at the painting of their dead sister, Josephine. She would have been 21 this year. Jack has no real memory of her, but Elsie still remembers her as the seven-year-old she once knew. She always thought that Josephine was Rudyard's favorite—or, at the very least, his favorite daughter. Jack, of course, has always been the treasured only son. As for Elsie herself, she has never really held her father's attention. Raising a glass of whiskey with Jack, she tells him not to leave her alone with their parents by joining the army, but he doesn't respond.

Elsie doesn't have to deal with the parental pressure that Rudyard puts on Jack. However, the absence of pressure basically means that Rudyard ignores Elsie. Instead, Rudyard focuses solely on turning Jack into a respectable young man, perhaps believing that Jack's success in life will reflect upon him (and, conversely, that whatever Elsie does will hardly impact his own image). In a way, then, Rudyard prioritizes his own stature in society over giving his children love and affection.

Hearing Rudyard approaching the drawing room, Elsie hides behind the chair and tells Jack to say she's gone to bed. When he enters, Rudyard tells Jack he should go get some sleep. He also offers some encouraging words, telling Jack not to be upset about the meeting that afternoon with Sparks and Pottle. He should "buck up" and keep moving. Jack agrees, saying that he plans to enlist as a private soldier (a soldier of the lowest possible rank). This unsettles Rudyard, who tells him not to get *too* eager—they will find a better solution. He'll certainly join the army, but he shouldn't make any rash decisions about enlisting as a private soldier.

It's humorous that Rudyard ends up telling Jack to "buck up," since this is exactly what Jack said when he imitated his father in private. Jack's imitation suggests that Rudyard tells Jack to "buck up" quite frequently, urging him to show strength and to move on from hardship without dwelling on it—a perfect illustration of Rudyard's values and his belief that young men like Jack should have a stiff upper lip. And yet, despite his belief that young men should be tough and brave, he doesn't want Jack to join the army as a low-ranking soldier, implying that he believes in the importance of status as much as he believes in things like courage and duty.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Ten months have passed. It's now October 1914, and World War I has been raging for a month and a half. Rudyard is standing in front of a large group and trying to recruit new soldiers by speaking passionately about the importance of preserving England's way of life. England has never been invaded, he points out, and this is something to be proud of. Now, though, German forces are only 50 miles away, and if they successfully take over the country, everything will descend into chaos. Ruthless violence will devastate the British population. Worse, Germany will control England when the war is over, and nothing about England will stay the same.

Rudyard's speech shows how proud he is that his country is powerful and mighty. He clearly takes pride in the fact that England has never been successfully overtaken by its enemies. And though he worries about the threat of violence posed by the encroaching German military, what he really *fears is the prospect of the country undergoing a massive change as a result of invasion. For him, then, very little is more important than preserving British customs and its power in the world.*

Rudyard wants the audience to understand the dire consequences of Germany overtaking England. If this happens, everything will have to be done "the German way": farmers will have to farm differently, people will have to eat German food, and England will lose its social customs. Plus, the towns will be renamed, maps will be written in German, and people will have to use German marks instead of English pounds. With all this in mind, Rudyard can't believe England is still only using a volunteer-based system of military service. The problem is that there are British citizens who won't make any kind of sacrifice for their country. Rudyard believes these people should be "shunned."

Rudyard fixates on the idea of England losing its sense of culture. To him, this is a horrific possibility, and he regards his list of "German" alternatives as sufficient motivation for even the most complacent people to join the military and fight to preserve the British way of life. His belief in British superiority also explains his desire for Jack to enlist: he wants his son to fight for England to stay the way it is, believing that protecting the country is worth putting Jack in danger.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Two weeks after Rudyard gives his recruitment speech, Elsie drills him with questions in the drawing room of their home. She has just been away for three weeks and was bewildered to discover that, in that time, Jack went off to the war. She wants to know how this happened, reminding her father that Jack can hardly see anything without his glasses. Rudyard tries to brush off her concern, focusing on the country's need for soldiers. Angered by his callousness, Elsie appeals to her mother, but Carrie is purposefully keeping herself out of the conversation by meticulously cataloguing the books on the shelves.

Although Carrie has already hinted at her disapproval of Jack going to war, she doesn't outwardly express her misgivings. Elsie, on the other hand, doesn't hesitate to address the fact that both the navy and the army had a good reason to reject Jack: his poor eyesight could put him—and others—in danger on the battlefield. Because he's so obsessed with the idea of Jack serving his country, though, Rudyard doesn't want to consider this possibility, instead simply taking pleasure in the fact that Jack was finally able to join the army.

Rudyard watches out the window for Jack, who is supposed to come home for a short while. Seeing his son, Rudyard excitedly leaves the room to greet him, at which point Carrie pulls Elsie aside and hisses that she's horrified that Jack has joined the army. She can't stop thinking about him dying in battle, especially since two of Jack's friends have already been killed. But because she can't change the situation, she hasn't said anything about it.

The fact that Carrie has to bury her feelings about Jack going to war indicates that Rudyard doesn't leave her any room to express her concerns. Instead of encouraging his wife to articulate her worries, then, Rudyard focuses on his own lofty ideals about bravery and duty, and this repressive attitude forces Carrie to suffer in silence, worrying all the while that Jack will die in battle.

As soon as Jack enters the drawing room, Elsie notices that he looks much older. He has a mustache now, and he's invigorated by his life as a lieutenant in the Irish Guards. He tries to answer his father's proud questions about military life, but Elsie keeps interrupting, demanding to know how Jack and Rudyard managed to get around the army's decision not to let Jack enlist. It soon emerges that Rudyard appealed to an old friend with great influence, and this helped get Jack into the Irish Guards.

Unable to get Jack into the army any other way, Rudyard used his own connections to sidestep the complications keeping Jack out of the military. In other words, he got Jack into the army in a somewhat dishonorable way, using nepotism and his own prestige to break the rules. Given that Rudyard believes so strongly in the idea of honor and dignity, it's ironic that he behaves dishonorably just so Jack can join the military. It also shows how badly Rudyard wants to see Jack fighting for England.

As she thinks about this, Elsie remembers that Rudyard's important friend recently died. She quickly puts it together that Rudyard convinced him to assert his influence while he was on his deathbed and in a state where it would have been impossible for him to argue the point. Reiterating the fact that multiple officials decided it was too risky to send Jack into battle, Elsie tells her father that it will be his fault if Jack dies.

As if it wasn't already dishonorable for Rudyard to bypass the rules by convincing his friend to let Jack into the Irish Guards, it now emerges that he did this when his friend was in a compromised state of mind. For someone who supposedly cares so much about honor, then, he behaves in a surprisingly shady way in order to get Jack into the military, revealing a certain amount of hypocrisy.

Rudyard justifies his behavior by saying that Elsie doesn't understand how dire the situation is in England right now. The country has spent the past 150 years building up what he calls a "family of nations." Some of the nations in this "family" can protect themselves, but some can't, since they're like helpless children. England must therefore act with the responsibility of a parent and defend these vulnerable countries.

Rudyard was willing to break the rules to get Jack into the military because he believes England's global power is at stake. To illustrate this claim, he sets forth some patronizing ideas about the value of imperialism (the policy of exerting power over other nations or regions). According to him, the world is better off because the British Empire has colonized so many other regions. With this belief in mind, then, Rudyard thinks protecting the country is more important than anything else—including, of course, following the rules set forth by the military (like the medical standards that prevented Jack from enlisting).

Responding to Rudyard's idea that Britain is responsible for a great "family of nations," Elsie points out that this "family" was created for England's financial benefit. Rudyard doesn't deny this, instead arguing that this is precisely why the British Empire has been so successful: it has combined kindness and virtue with its own business interests. The countries under its power have benefited not just "spiritually," but also economically.

Rudyard has a romanticized idea of the British Empire and the power it has exerted over other countries. In his mind, everyone has benefitted as a result of England's rampant colonialism. Instead of recognizing that England itself reaps way more benefits than the vast majority of the places it has overtaken, he takes the self-congratulatory perspective that the country has done the rest of the world a favor by conquering so many nations. This perspective aligns with the imperialist beliefs that Rudyard Kipling held in real life.

Elsie is incensed by the idea that Rudyard would care more about preserving the British Empire than about protecting his own son. She then heavily insinuates to Rudyard that Jack only went to war to get away from the family, not because he cares about the British Empire. But Rudyard ignores this, believing that, until Germany is defeated, the British must go on putting their children at risk by sending them to battle.

To Rudyard, protecting England is worth making great sacrifices. If that includes sending Jack to war, then so be it. Elsie, on the other hand, hates the idea of Jack possibly dying in battle, especially since she knows that he didn't even go to war for the express purpose of saving England—rather, he went to get away from Rudyard. Elsie therefore resents her father for being so domineering that Jack is willing to risk his life just to get away from home.

Carrie suddenly erupts into rage because somebody has come into the family's yard and wants to snap a picture of Rudyard. When Elsie takes her out of the room, Jack admits to Rudyard that it's a little frightening that two of his friends have already died. But Rudyard assures Jack that he won't die, though he doesn't say why, exactly, he's so confident about this. Instead, he tells Jack that he knows what it's like to lose a friend. Rudyard himself lost his best friend when he was a young man. This depressed him, but he now knows that the only way to get through hardship is to simply face the pain until it goes away. He even says that he envies Jack, who has the privilege of serving in the war.

Until now, Carrie has been more or less quiet throughout the entire scene. When she suddenly has an outburst of rage, though, it becomes clear that she has quite a bit of emotion bottled up inside of her—a reminder that she isn't as comfortable with the idea of Jack going to war as Rudyard is. It also becomes apparent in this moment that Jack has some of his own misgivings about going to war, as evidenced by his reaction to the death of his fellow soldiers. However, Rudyard once again tries to get him to "buck up," this time insisting that emotional pain is just something people have to bear. His response isn't a particularly sympathetic one, but it perfectly aligns with Rudyard's belief in the importance of showing grit and bravery.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

It's now September 1915. Three Irish soldiers endure heavy rain in a trench on the Western Front. The sound of rain is interrupted by a huge nearby explosion, unsettling McHugh, who cautiously peers over the ledge of the trench to see what's happening. When he sees nothing, he climbs back down, at which point his fellow soldiers, Doyle and Bowe, come back from digging a latrine. McHugh eagerly asks if the latrine is ready, but they chastise him for not helping them. McHugh claims he has terrible stomach cramps, which is why he needs to use the latrine so badly, but Bowe tells him that the shell that just exploded landed in the latrine, killing a Colonel. It has thus become the largest latrine in all of France.

Most of Act One has addressed war in the abstract; in this scene, the audience sees an actual battlefield for the first time. The action is mundane, even showing a touch of humor, but it also reinforces the theme of duty and honor in war. By refusing to dig the latrine, McHugh fails to live up to certain responsibilities. Instead of prioritizing his country and its military above all else, he thinks only about himself. This is the kind of selfish attitude that Rudyard wants to make sure Jack never adopts. And yet, McHugh has already joined the military, indicating that he actually has *honored his duty to serve his country—it's just that behaving honorably during wartime, even in mundane moments like this one, is harder than it seems in the abstract.*

Jack comes around with grease and talcum powder, ordering the men to show him their feet so he can check for trench foot. Bowe and Doyle follow his orders, but McHugh ignores him. Jack keeps making his rounds through the trench, giving other men grease and powder. Meanwhile, Doyle rubs powder onto Bowe's feet, which is very pleasant for Bowe until Doyle parts his toes and finds a crack filled with colored pus. Bowe yelps in pain. McHugh, for his part, grumbles about having to look at Bowe's disgusting feet. When Jack comes back around, Bowe asks if it's trench foot, but Jack doesn't think so. All the same, he tasks Doyle with the responsibility of caring for Bowe, making sure he powders his feet twice a day.

In this scene, Jack appears to be a very conscientious and responsible soldier. Even though walking through the trenches and handing out foot powder isn't necessarily all that glorious, he seems to genuinely care about keeping his men from getting trench foot (a condition that soldiers often developed during World War I because their feet were wet for long periods of time). When Jack tells Doyle to take care of Bowe's feet, he stresses the idea that soldiers ought to be responsible for one another. The implication is that each person in the trenches has a duty to help his fellow soldiers—an idea Rudyard would certainly approve of.

Jack goes to get Bowe a pair of dry socks, but before he leaves, he tells McHugh that his boots better be off when he comes back. Once he's gone, McHugh starts unlacing, but complains about having to take orders from Jack. McHugh hates Rudyard Kipling, whom he calls a "protestant bastard." This is why he doesn't want to listen to Jack, finding it ridiculous that a Protestant from England is commanding a platoon of Irish Catholic soldiers. To mess with Jack, then, he smears horse poop on his feet. Jack comes back and takes McHugh's foot in his hands. This infuriates Jack, but he keeps his temper, simply wiping his dirty hands on McHugh's jacket.

McHugh's attitude is in direct opposition to the kind of responsible, honorable attitude that Rudyard wants Jack to embody. Instead of obeying Jack (his commander), he shows him defiance, clearly unwilling to suppress his animosity for the greater good of the United Kingdom. This is because he's bitter about the tension between Irish Catholics and British Protestants—a tension that was very much alive at that time in Ireland (and for years to come). And though this resentment is somewhat understandable (at least considering the time period and the complex dynamics at play in Ireland), his hostility is clearly unproductive in this context—a situation in which everyone should work together.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

Hours later, it's still raining. Bowe, Doyle, and McHugh wait for Jack to come around with their portions of rum. Bowe is oscillating between extreme temperatures, feeling cold one moment and hot the next. He can't stop shivering. Meanwhile, explosions sound in the distance, making it clear that the battle will soon begin. Hearing these horrifying sounds, Bowe claims to need to return to the dugout for a moment, saying that he needs to warm up. He tries to get past Doyle and McHugh, but they don't move out of his way. He pleads with them, but McHugh grabs him and vows to kill him before letting him through.

Given that McHugh was the one who seemed so unwilling to make personal sacrifices for a greater good, it's surprising that Bowe is the one who ultimately ends up trying to shirk his duties as a soldier. In fact, McHugh even forces Bowe to uphold his soldierly responsibilities, threatening to kill him if he tries to run away. The fact that Bowe originally seemed so dedicated to the Army's success just goes to show that it's hard to hold onto a sense of honor and duty in the face of actual danger. Thus, the scenes in the trenches provide context for Rudyard's relatively abstract ideals of honor and duty.

McHugh hits Bowe in the face. Just then, Jack appears, but it's unclear if he saw this outburst. He gives the men their rum, then pulls Doyle aside and asks if everything's all right. Doyle admits that they all might be better off without Bowe, but Jack says he thinks Bowe will shape up.

Jack's faith in Bowe—despite the man's obvious desire to abandon his responsibilities—suggests that he has faith in his fellow soldiers. In short, Jack gives his men the chance to prove themselves. In a way, this is a very honorable trait, but it could also be naïve, putting Jack and everyone else in danger, since cowardly soldiers are unlikely to stand by one another in the heat of the moment.

ACT 1, SCENE 8

It's five minutes before Jack and the others will climb out of the trench and run toward enemy lines. They're standing together with their equipment, which includes a heavy backpack, a rifle, and—among other things—**pigeon** cages. Bowe can't get his pack onto his shoulders, complaining that it's too heavy. He begs McHugh for help, but McHugh ignores him. Meanwhile, Doyle realizes there's mud in his rifle and frantically starts trying to clear it by peeing into the barrel—except he can't get himself to pee. He blubbers in fear while trying to pee, but nothing comes.

In the moments before an attack, the tension in the trench nears a breaking point. Even though McHugh forced Bowe to uphold his soldierly duty, he still doesn't seem to care very much about him. He won't even help Bowe lift the backpack onto his shoulders, showing he's still preoccupied with his own concerns. Meanwhile, Doyle's frantic struggle to clear mud out of his gun subtly criticizes the idea that going to war is an honorable thing. Although Rudyard romanticizes the life of a soldier by seeing it as a deeply noble and respectable form of service, here Doyle is in the trenches, hysterically trying to pee into his gun—not such a pretty picture!

As this plays out, Jack tells his men that when they rush onto the battlefield, they'll see a stretch of woods called "Chalk Pit Wood," which they should run toward. When they get into the enemy's trenches, they should open their birdcages and let the **pigeons** fly back, alerting the higher-ups that they've made it to the other side. Bowe's pigeon, however, is already dead, so Jack tells him he doesn't have to carry it across the battlefield—a fact that makes McHugh jealous.

Considering that the men haven't even left the trench yet, the death of Bowe's pigeon is an ominous sign. The pigeon is supposed to signal that the men have safely reached the German trenches, so the fact that Bowe's pigeon has already died hints that this attack's outcome won't be unambiguously good news for anyone, including the Kipling family.

The bombardment ahead of the attack suddenly stops, and the battlefield goes eerily quiet. Jack tells his men to attach their bayonets to their rifles, but Bowe's hands aren't steady enough to do this, so he loses the bayonet in the mud. Jack, for his part, thinks to himself about how scared he is, saying, "Please God I mustn't let them down." He then thinks longingly about home, but his thoughts are interrupted by the sound of whistles blaring through the trenches. He and the rest of the men charge onto the battlefield, McHugh and Doyle screaming in unison as they go.

Attaching bayonets is a particularly ominous step because it implies that the soldiers will be entering hand-to-hand combat at any moment. Although Jack originally wanted to join the army just to escape his domineering father, it now seems that he has adopted some of Rudyard's ideas about duty and responsibility. Right before rushing into battle, he doesn't think exclusively about his own safety, but about courageously leading his men. Another interpretation is that he's referring to his family when he says, "Please God I mustn't let them down." This would suggest that he still feels pressure to behave honorably in battle, always trying to live up to his father's high expectations.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Four days after Jack charged enemy lines, Rudyard receives a telegram from the army. Instead of opening it right away, he continues to work on a poem that features the refrain "When the English began to hate." Carrie comes into the drawing room and tries to get him to hurry, since they're due at a social engagement, but then she sees the telegram. As much as she'd like to, though, she can't get Rudyard to stop working on the poem. He even reads it aloud to her and asks her for any advice. She proposes a word change and suggests that the refrain might be a little too "harsh," but he disagrees. When she leaves, he opens the telegram and yells out in dismay.

The poem Rudyard works on in this section is called "The Beginnings." Kipling published it (in real life) in 1917. It explores the anti-German sentiments circulating in England during World War I and even—to a certain extent—investigates Kipling's own hatred of Germany at the time. Carrie's suggestion that the refrain, "When the English began to hate," is too "harsh" reveals her more levelheaded approach to the war. Whereas Rudyard can't stand the idea of Germany threatening England, Carrie is mainly concerned with Jack's safety, which is why she's eager for Rudyard to read the telegram. Rudyard, though, continues to focus on his poem, demonstrating his tendency to distract himself from true emotion by thinking abstractly about war-related matters.

Carrie rushes back in, and Rudyard informs her that Jack is missing. He's not dead, Rudyard stresses—just missing in action. He could have gotten lost and might turn up at any moment. Carrie pays this no mind, instead demanding to know why Rudyard urged Jack into the army. He was always pressuring the boy, and now the family will suffer because of this.

In the emotion of the moment, Carrie finally speaks straightforwardly about how Rudyard pressured Jack into the army. She doesn't hide her resentment, no longer caring if she upsets Rudyard by speaking out against his idealistic beliefs—beliefs that have clearly put Jack in harm's way, since they're what helped drive him to join the army.

Rudyard can't believe that Carrie blames him for what has happened to Jack, reminding her that every young man in England joined the army. How could he have stopped Jack from enlisting, when that's exactly what everyone else was doing? And even if Rudyard *could* have stopped Jack, he wouldn't have wanted to: it would have been deeply dishonorable if Jack hadn't contributed to the war effort. Carrie recognizes that this aligns with Rudyard's ideals, but she doubts that he *actually* believes this when it comes to his own son.

Rudyard appears unwilling to reevaluate the role he played in getting Jack into the army. This makes sense, since it's much easier to tell himself that Jack actively wanted to serve his country than it is to own up to the pressure he put on his son. As such, he relies on his normal platitudes about the importance and honor of fighting for England. This time, though, Carrie doesn't just sit there and let him speak abstractly about his high-minded ideals. Instead, she directly questions whether Rudyard genuinely believes what he says, implying that it's one thing to talk *about these patriotic notions, but another thing entirely to stand by those ideas when they lead to hardship and grief.*

Rudyard protests, insisting that, if Jack died on the battlefield, it would be the "finest moment in his young life." As his parent, Rudyard wouldn't want to deprive Jack of this. Still, Carrie doesn't think Rudyard truly believes this, telling him that there's "no need" for him to say such a thing to her.

Rudyard responds to Carrie's accusation by doubling down on his romanticization of bravery. He claims to be so committed to the idea of sacrifice that he views Jack's possible death in battle as something to be proud of. Carrie, however, sees this as just one big performance, refusing to believe that Rudyard could ever actually think his own son's death is anything but horrific and sad. He is, after all, only human. In this way, Carrie's accusations feel like attempts to give Rudyard permission to grieve Jack's disappearance, showing him that it's all right to let go of his romanticized ideals in this devastating moment.

Elsie enters and tries to hurry her parents along. She has gifts for the family to give out at the party they're supposed to attend. But then she sees the telegram and asks if Jack is dead. Rudyard quickly tells her that he's only missing. She quietly starts wrapping one of the presents, eventually saying that Jack will surely survive. She then asks her parents to wrap the other two gifts. The family wraps in silence, until Elsie finally asks Rudyard why he let Jack go to war. Infuriated, Rudyard says there couldn't possibly be a sacrifice too large when it comes to winning this war.

Like her mother, Elsie resents Rudyard for encouraging Jack to go to war. Once again, though, Rudyard clings to his idealistic beliefs, trying to convince his family that England's safety is, in the long run, more important than Jack's life—a tough point to make! Indeed, his repetition of the point suggests that he hasn't entirely convinced himself, let alone his family.

Elsie doesn't want to hear Rudyard's ideas about sacrifice and duty. She tells him that the real reason Jack went to war was to escape the family. Jack couldn't bear the overwhelming love and expectations that Rudyard heaped on him. She then asks her father if this is an honorable reason to go to war. Is it a worthy sacrifice? Having asked this, she breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably as her parents stare dumbfoundedly at her.

Elsie finally reveals that Jack went to war to escape Rudyard's overbearing ways. But it's unlikely this will change how Rudyard views the situation; he cares so much about trying to turn Jack into a brave, honorable man that he has little incentive to second-guess Jack's intentions for joining the army. In his mind, Jack enlisted to protect his country. Any other interpretation would threaten to unravel Rudyard's entire worldview. Rather than pursuing this idea, then, Rudyard just stares at Elsie as she cries, unable to go any further with this conversation because doing so would mean examining his flaws as a father.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

In a flashback to 1904, Rudyard lies in the drawing room under a camping tarp with Jack and Elsie, who are both young children. Using a flashlight, they pretend to look at the stars, and Rudyard quizzes the children about the constellations. He then tells them a story featuring "Captain Jack Kipling," the "finest cavalry officer of his generation." The story he tells is about Jack coming across a dangerous thief stealing from a fruit vendor on the Grand Trunk Road in India. Captain Jack Kipling catches the thief, fights him off, and is rewarded by the fruit vendor.

Even when Jack was a small child, Rudyard filled him with ideas about honor and bravery. Of course, this is a somewhat touching scene, since Rudyard entertains his children by telling an affectionate and exciting story about Jack's future. However, this story also sets a certain expectation—namely, that Rudyard wants Jack to grow up to be a fearless, respected military official.

By the time the story ends, Jack is peacefully asleep, but Elsie is still awake. She asks what *she'll* be when she's older, and Rudyard says she'll get married to Captain Jack Kipling's best friend, have five children, and live in a house near the Kipling family estate.

Rudyard has high expectations for Jack but doesn't expect much of Elsie. There's some inherent sexism at play here, since Rudyard seems to think that the best possible thing Elsie could do in life is marry and have children, failing to even consider the possibility that she could ever do something as honorable and important as her brother. To that end, he ties Elsie's future to the idea of Jack's success by saying that she'll marry his best friend. Whereas Jack has to live up to Rudyard's exceedingly high standards, then, Elsie has to deal with his depressingly low *expectations of her.*

ACT 2, SCENE 3

It's 1917, two years after Jack first went missing. He has yet to be found, but Carrie and Rudyard have spent the years interviewing Irish Guardsmen to find out what happened to him. Carrie has an extensive filing system containing notes from all the interviews. Rudyard is also writing a book about the Irish Guards, but the main purpose of all this research is to piece together whether Jack is dead. Rudyard is exhausted from the whole ordeal, whereas Carrie works tirelessly to find information about her son. Bursting into the drawing room, she excitedly makes a connection between one interview and another, saying that they now have overlapping accounts suggesting that Jack was seen near "Chalk Pit Wood."

Rudyard and Carrie's desperate search for Jack shows how difficult it is to lack emotional closure after losing a loved one. It's unclear whether or not Jack died in battle, but the fact that he has been missing for two years makes it quite unlikely that he's still alive and well—even if he didn't die when he originally *went missing, he would have had to stay out of harm's way in the ensuing two years. Nonetheless, Carrie and Rudyard naturally want to find out what happened to him, since this would at least make it easier to cope with their loss.*

Rudyard doesn't share Carrie's enthusiasm, not wanting to dive into the files at that moment to confirm a tenuous connection between two interviews. Elsie—who comes in to announce that another interviewee has arrived—agrees with her father, trying to get Carrie to save the matter for later. This annoys Carrie, who accuses Rudyard of not caring about the project. Her comment frustrates Rudyard, who says he has fully devoted himself to finding Jack, pausing his entire career to gather information.

The tension between Rudyard and Carrie appears to have worsened in the last two years, as they struggle with Jack's disappearance in different ways. Carrie never wanted their son to go to war in the first place, so it's understandably difficult for her to accept that he may have died as a result of joining the army. Rudyard, on the other hand, actively wanted Jack to enlist. Their disagreement underscores their entire relational dynamic, as Carrie clearly resents Rudyard for pushing Jack toward the military—a resentment that comes out in her accusations about how he isn't trying hard enough to find Jack.

After Elsie goes to fetch the visitor, Rudyard throws the files on the ground and angrily looks for a cigarette. Discovering that Carrie has thrown them out because she doesn't want him smoking, he has an idea: he goes to the place Jack used to hide cigarettes and takes out the pack. He and Carrie sit on the floor amongst the scattered papers, both of them feeling sadness sweep over them at the memory of young Jack stashing away these cigarettes—cigarettes that taste awful, having dried out over the years.

Jack's cigarettes serve as a reminder of how young he was before he went off to war. He was just a teenager who was afraid of his parents catching him with cigarettes, which is why he hid them in the first place. The fact that they've gone stale only adds to the sadness of this moment, as if Jack's youthfulness has slipped away forever.

Elsie brings in the guest, whose name is Mr. Frankland. He makes small talk, noting that he's a fan of Rudyard's writing and repeatedly asking if he should come back at a better time, since the files are still scattered throughout the room and the air is tense with conflict. But Rudyard assures him that now is fine, so Frankland says that he brought a friend from the Irish Guards. They had neighboring beds in a hospital during the war. Frankland lent him one of Rudyard's books and learned that his friend knew Jack. Carrie quickly asks if Jack is alive, but Frankland thinks it'd be better if his friend explained, so he goes to fetch him.

Mr. Frankland's arrival is a slight ray of hope, at least for Carrie, who's so eager for information about Jack. Living with such uncertainty, it seems, is one of the hardest parts of having a loved one go missing in action. The fact that Frankland has brought someone who knew Jack is therefore a big deal for Carrie, even though the guest's visit probably won't bring her son back home.

Frankland escorts Bowe into the room. Bowe is in a bad state, hyperventilating and speaking nonsense, insisting that poisonous gas is filling the room. He says he needs his gasmask, clearly thinking he's in battle. Frankland tries to calm him down, and Elsie brings him a glass of water. He starts reciting the names of other Irish Guards, then explains—almost incoherently—that eight of them made it to the woods across the battlefield. One of them, he says, was his lieutenant, but he doesn't say the lieutenant's name. Pausing, he hears (real) explosions coming from the Battle of Passchendaele, which Rudyard explains is 100 miles away.

Rudyard and Carrie have spent the last two years interviewing Irish Guards, but they haven't made much progress. Now, though, they might finally find out what happened to Jack, since Bowe was with him when he was last seen. And yet, Bowe is deeply scarred by the war—so traumatized that it's unclear if he's in the right state of mind to deliver reliable information. His apparent trauma challenges Rudyard's romanticized ideas about what it means to be a soldier, indicating that it's not as glorious as Rudyard would like to think. The Battle of Passchendaele, fought in Belgium, was one of the worst battles on the Western Front—even those on the home front in England couldn't ignore the sounds of the distant fighting.

Bowe slowly comes to his senses and explains that Jack was his lieutenant. Jack always used to look after Bowe's feet, making sure he wasn't developing trench foot. He was a very kind platoon commander, Bowe says. On the day in question—which Rudyard identifies as the Battle of Loos—Bowe and McHugh ended up lying in a "shell hole" for a long time with another dead soldier. Bowe stops telling his story and says he didn't want to come to the Kiplings' house. He doesn't like talking about this. But Rudyard tells him the family has been interviewing Irish Guards every day and that he's the first person who was actually with Jack on the day of his disappearance. Any information he has—one way or the other—would bring closure to the family.

Rudyard believes in facing emotional hardship head on, so it makes sense that he wants to know what happened to Jack, even if this means finally discovering that he was killed. His approach confirms that the uncertainty surrounding what happened to Jack is one of the hardest things to bear, since it keeps both Rudyard and Carrie from gaining any kind of emotional closure and coming to terms with their loss.

After a moment of silence, Bowe explains what it was like to run out onto the battlefield. Doyle was shot and killed, but Bowe made it to the other side, jumping into the enemy trench and landing on a dead German, whose gasmask he stole just as poisonous gas crept along the ground. He then found other Irish Guards and ran with them through the trenches. Jack was one of these men.

Again, it seems as if Bowe's story about what happened on the day of Jack's disappearance will finally give the Kipling family some emotional closure. On a broader level, his description of that day shows the brutality of war, which, in turn, challenges Rudyard's romanticized ideas about the life of a soldier.

Bowe says he wasn't afraid while all of this happened. He was frightened before and after, but in the moment, he felt nothing. Rudyard jumps in at this moment, asking if he felt "uplifted" or "excited" at any point during the attack, but Bowe reiterates that he didn't feel anything at all. Rudyard then clarifies that Jack made it to the other side with Bowe, and when Bowe confirms this, Rudyard asks if Jack seemed "excited." Or, he wonders, was he "nervous"? Bowe says he seemed fine, but Rudyard pushes on, wanting to know if his son seemed "pleased to be there." Bowe notes that *nobody* was *pleased* to be at war. Jack was just fine, telling the men to push on. This idea—of Jack urging his men onward—pleases Rudyard.

Even as Bowe narrates the story of what happened to Jack, Rudyard romanticizes the idea of his son behaving courageously in battle. This just slows down Bowe's story, delaying the information about what became of Jack. And yet, Rudyard can't help but hope that his son was "excited" to be at war. In and of itself, this shows Rudyard's unrealistic outlook on the nature of war, which Bowe knows is simply frightening—not the kind of thing someone would ever be "pleased" to participate in, no matter how idealistic they might be. But Rudyard seems desperate to hang onto at least a scrap of his idealism, even as he's faced with the news of Jack's likely death.

McHugh didn't want to keep going, despite Jack's orders. But Jack said that the men had to push through the woods and overtake the second line of enemy trenches. The trees were on fire, but then the rain extinguished the flames and Bowe could see all the way through the woods—he and the other soldiers were looking straight at a huge machine-gun post, with guns perched on raised platforms to easily pick off enemies. Jack told the men to charge toward it, but McHugh thought this was crazy, yelling that Jack would be a murderer to force them toward certain death. Jack, however, said that they had no choice.

This part of Bowe's story suggests that Jack took many of his father's ideas about duty and bravery to heart. Even though attacking the machine-gun post was wildly dangerous, he told his men that they simply had to do it. In this way, he prioritized his responsibility as a lieutenant over his own life, making the exact kind of sacrifice that Rudyard always talks about with such awe and appreciation.

Bowe explains that Jack blew a whistle and the remaining Irish Guards pulled themselves out of the trenches. But then Bowe was somehow lying in the bottom of a hole with a body next to him. He looked up and saw Jack near the hole with the entire lower half of his face blown off. He was still alive, and Bowe wanted to help him, but McHugh jumped into the hole and told Bowe to run. Bowe tried to get him to help Jack, but McHugh refused, darting off the way he came.

Unlike Jack, McHugh didn't care about his duties as a soldier. He knew that helping Jack would mean putting himself in further danger, and instead of accepting this fate in the name of responsibility and sacrifice, he ran. His actions thus stand in direct opposition to pretty much all of Rudyard's ideas about valor and duty—ideas that he clearly passed along to Jack, who ultimately suffered as a result of his unyielding courage (as evidenced by the fact that half his face was blown off).

Jack was crying in pain, Bowe says. And though Bowe wanted to help, he didn't want to "humiliate" his lieutenant by going to his aid while he cried. It wouldn't have been "dignified" for Jack to cry while a lower-ranking soldier helped him. So, Bowe ran away.

Bowe's reason for not helping Jack seems like a weak excuse. And yet, the implication is that it's dishonorable for a well-respected soldier to show pain. Oddly enough, this aligns with Rudyard's ideas about maintaining composure and showing strength in moments of hardship. In a way, then, Bowe's excuse throws Rudyard's worldview into question—after all, Jack showed both great courage and "undignified" weakness within moments of each other, suggesting that honor isn't as clear-cut as Rudyard has believed.

Bowe asks for Rudyard's forgiveness. He adds that he was going to report that Jack had been wounded as soon as he got back to safer grounds, but right as he left, a shell exploded where Jack was lying. Taking this in, Rudyard softly thanks Bowe. He repeats what the soldier has just told him, paraphrasing Bowe's words by saying that Jack died while attacking a machine-gun post after having bravely led his men into heavy fire.

The only way Rudyard can cope with the news of Jack's death is by resorting to his romanticized ideas about honor and bravery. This is why he says that Jack died while courageously leading his men into battle. Putting it this way makes it easier for Rudyard to handle this otherwise devastating loss, making him feel like—at the very least—Jack died a noble death while fighting for something bigger than himself.

Rudyard never accepts Bowe's apology, but he doesn't treat him unkindly, either. Soon enough, Frankland takes Bowe away, leaving Carrie and Rudyard alone in the drawing room. Rudyard tries to take comfort in the fact that Jack showed great bravery, but this does nothing to comfort Carrie. Still, he forges on, saying they can be thankful that Jack had the chance to do his duty as a soldier. Because of this, his life was "complete," even if it was cut short. Rudyard is proud and happy for him.

Once again, Rudyard tries to make himself feel better by focusing on the honorable sacrifice Jack made for his country. His suggestion that he and Carrie should be proud of this illustrates just how eager he is to reframe the reality of Jack's death. Instead of seeing it as a tragedy, he wants to view it as something worth praising, as if his son has just accomplished something remarkable. More than ever, it becomes clear in this moment that Rudyard's reaction is a defense mechanism that Rudyard uses to protect himself from grief— it's unlikely that he actually feels happy *for Jack, who died a gruesome death.*

Carrie criticizes Rudyard for seeing Jack's death in such a positive light. Rudyard defends himself by saying that—at the very least—he's comforted that so many other British families are in the same position. Again, this does nothing to comfort Carrie. It doesn't matter how many people have lost their sons; either way, Jack is still dead. This is why Carrie wishes Rudyard would stop pretending that his belief in duty and honor makes this tragic loss any easier. She then brings up what he said when Jack first enlisted: that if Jack died in battle, it would be the proudest moment of the boy's life, and one Rudyard wouldn't want to deprive him of. But Jack was 18, he died in the pouring rain, and he could hardly see. He was in pain. There is, Carrie says, no "glory" in a death like that.

Carrie takes a much more honest approach to her own grief. Unlike Rudyard, she doesn't try to insulate herself from the pain of losing Jack, refusing to see his death as something to be proud of. Instead, she's realistic about the horrible circumstances of her son's death, urging Rudyard to see that his romanticized notions about duty are out of touch with what it's really like to die in the mud on the battlefield. What's more, her suggestion that Rudyard doesn't actually believe these things implies that even he *knows that his own idealized beliefs won't hold up when applied to his own life—after all, it's much easier to believe in honor and duty when these things are just abstract ideas.*

Rudyard wonders if Carrie wants him to admit that he's solely responsible for the death of their son. If that's what she wants, then so be it—not a day passes that he doesn't think about the possibility that he killed Jack. And when he thinks about this, he wonders if there's an afterlife, realizing that, if there isn't, then a sacrifice has to *really* matter here on earth. If there's no heaven, then Jack's sacrifice is even more "glorious," but when Rudyard thinks this way, he always stops and asks himself how he could "dare" hope that his son *hasn't* entered some kind of afterlife.

Now that Carrie has made it harder for Rudyard to cling to his ideas about honor and bravery, he flails for ways to feel better about Jack's death, going on somewhat confusingly about whether or not an afterlife exists. The most important thing here, though, is that Rudyard admits that he often second-guesses his decision to pressure Jack into joining the army. This confession suggests that he's not as steadfastly committed to his romanticized ideas as it seems, indicating that, despite his best efforts, he can't quite protect himself from the raw emotion of losing a son.

Rudyard knows that Carrie *does* believe in an afterlife. He therefore notes that she can rest easily, since this would mean that Jack is—in some respects—still alive. Carrie doesn't refute this, but she does say she misses him, and Rudyard says he does, too. He then bows his head and cries. As he weeps, Carrie talks about losing Josephine, saying that she always felt like a part of herself died along with her daughter. Eventually, though, she healed. But now she feels like all the life has left her, and she doesn't know how she'll go on. "We'll manage," Rudyard says.

This is a tender moment, since it's the only time in the play that Rudyard and Carrie connect on an emotional level. It's significant that Rudyard admits to missing Jack. Until this point, he has tried to focus on the honorable nature of Jack's death instead of admitting his own feelings about the loss of his son. Now, though, he makes a very simple confession: he misses Jack. And this straightforward statement causes him to break down, as he finally allows himself to feel his own grief, though he quickly gets ahold of himself and says that he and Carrie will "manage." Rudyard's quick recovery suggests that he's habitually returning to his tough, emotionless outlook.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Seven years have passed since Rudyard and Carrie learned about Jack's death. It's Elsie's wedding day, and Carrie fusses over her dress as they stand in the drawing room. When Rudyard comes in and sees his daughter dressed as a bride for the first time, he hardly says anything. He looks much older and weaker, but he manages to say that Elsie looks quite "fine." When pressed to say more, he awkwardly says that he likes the dress. When Carrie leaves the room, Rudyard tells Elsie that she has finally brought her mother to life again by getting married.

The fact that Rudyard looks old and weak suggests that Jack's death has taken an enormous toll on him. Although he'd like to think that he and Carrie can "manage" to get along in the aftermath of their son's death, he seems withdrawn in this scene, as if he can't quite invest himself in life now that he's been through such a devastating tragedy. He's even distracted from giving Elsie the attention she deserves on her wedding day. In this regard, it's almost as if Jack's death overshadows Elsie's wedding, much as Rudyard's ambitions for Jack once overshadowed his interest in his daughter's life.

Making conversation, Rudyard tells Elsie about a Hindu wedding he once witnessed in India. The bride's mother and father stood on either side of her, and though the mother was dry-eyed, the father wept uncontrollably. The man was distraught, Rudyard says, to lose his daughter to the groom. Elsie responds by apologizing about leaving Rudyard and Carrie all alone, but Rudyard insists they'll be fine. He then recites a Punjabi saying that "daughters are only visitors." When Elsie asks what, exactly, this means, he says the implication is that the bride becomes "property of the groom." At this, Elsie thanks God she's English, which stirs Rudyard into laughter. He heartily agrees with this sentiment.

Rudyard doesn't have a very close relationship with Elsie, but he recognizes that her marriage will take her away from him and Carrie. This means that they'll no longer have any children living with them—Elsie will be gone, and both Jack and Josephine are dead. In this sense, Rudyard's life is full of loss. However, it appears that he still clings to his patriotism, as evidenced by how much he enjoys Carrie's joke about being grateful she's British. Even after losing Jack in the war, then, Rudyard has maintained his idealistic values, though it's unclear if they've actually helped him in any tangible way.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Nine years after Elsie's wedding, Rudyard and Carrie sit at home listening to the radio, which announces Hitler's rise to power. Rudyard quickly turns it off, saying, "For nothing, for nothing, for nothing." And then, as if speaking to children who aren't there, he recites a poem that features two different speakers. The first speaker asks if there has been news of his son, Jack, but the second speaker says there has been no word of him. Toward the end of the poem, the first speaker asks how he can find "comfort" in life if his boy, Jack, is never to return. The second speaker says there's no comfort to be found, except for the knowledge that Jack was an honorable man who brought pride to his countrymen.

It's not exactly clear what Rudyard means when he says, "For nothing, for nothing, for nothing." However, one interpretation is that the news of Hitler's growing power in Germany makes him feel as if the attempt to prevent a German victory in World War I was all "for nothing." This might suggest that Jack's death didn't end up making a difference. And yet, the poem Rudyard recites—which is called "My Boy Jack"—celebrates the idea that Jack died an honorable death while serving his country. It seems, then, that Rudyard has maintained his patriotism and his idealistic notions of honor and bravery, even if he has been weighed down by the tragedy of Jack's death at the same time. In the end, it's not clear whether Rudyard fully reconciles his belief in patriotism and duty with the deeply felt loss of Jack.

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