Rudyard Kipling

Dillingham, William B.

Published by ELT Press

Dillingham, William B.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/22606.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/22606
CHAPTER 1

Capering Among the Dumb Gods of Egypt: "The Finest Story in the World"

Ostensibly "The Finest Story in the World" is a serious fictional account of reincarnation with misogynic overtones. Actually it is a detailed portrait of a man who does not understand himself. The situation is one in which a narrator characterizes himself far more than he realizes and in a way far different from what he apparently intends, for his alternating exhilaration and frustration often come across as somewhat more comedic than intense. What response other than amusement could be expected from a passage such as the narrator’s description of how he felt and how he reacted when he thought he had proof that Charlie Mears, the young man with whom he has been meeting, has been remembering actual adventures from his past lives? He says that he "capered among the dumb gods of Egypt," that he "danced among the gods of the Egyptian court." To be sure, there would be nothing humorous about "capering" and "dancing" if he were speaking metaphorically, as at first he certainly seems to be, but then it becomes clear that he is actually describing his actions. That is, he seems to have in fact capered and danced with joy. He gives evidence of this extraordinarily strange, comic behavior when he confides that he had to end his cavorting when "a policeman saw me and took steps in my direction."

If the narrator’s joyous excitement is at times less compelling than laughable, so is his frustration. When Charlie wishes to read poetry rather than talk about his past lives, and he requests that the gas be turned up, the narrator, desperate for information about those former lives, confesses that he “could have broken the gas-globe over his head.” At another time, when Charlie insists upon reciting lines from eminent poets rather than recounting the adventures of a past life, the narrator expresses his frustration though hyperbole. He refers to the
formidable verse that Charlie is reading as “those accursed books of poetry,” and he exclaims: “I wished every English poet blotted out of the memory of mankind. I blasphemed the mightiest names of song.” Shortly thereafter, he says that he again “cursed all the poets of England.” Such moments in the story as these—the narrator in the act of dancing, cavorting, and raving at poets in comic frustration—tend of make the words of Grish Chunder, an Indian acquaintance of the narrator’s, poignantly descriptive: “Very funny fools, your English.” John Bayley raised a question that others should have asked long before, namely whether Kipling was being entirely serious in this story. “It is difficult to say,” writes Bayley, “how far he had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote ‘The Finest Story in the World.’... From the tone of the story the likeliest thing is that he was kidding, and yet kidding, as they say on the level.”

“The Finest Story in the World” has been often and deeply admired but as far as I can determine never for its humor and satiric effect. In Kipling criticism the work is commonly seen primarily as a serious expression of the author’s beliefs about what goes into the making of a fine work of literature. In this regard, Andrew Lang proclaimed “‘The Finest Story in the World,’” to be just that. It is, wrote Lang, “one of the five or six best stories in the world.” Angus Wilson praised the work for its powerful evocation of the past and for what it reveals about the workings of the literary imagination. It is, he remarked, “Kipling in communication with his creative self,” Kipling commenting on the “creative process.” Others, however, have not rated the story highly. An early admirer of Kipling’s writings, George Saintsbury, read the work as a “legend of metempsychosis,” and was not greatly pleased with it. He complained that it “has affected me in a very strange fashion.” There is no way of knowing, but perhaps Saintsbury felt when he read the work that he wanted to laugh but resisted the temptation as being an improper response. Kingsley Amis was put off by Kipling’s treatment of reincarnation, which he viewed as the center of interest in the story. He declared the work pretty much a flop. It fails, he judged, “because reincarnation is such an intractably dull idea.”

As has often been the case, criticism of “‘The Finest Story in the World’” has centered on ideas—Kipling’s beliefs about what constitutes a great work of fiction or the concept of reincarnation—rather than on characterization. Yet his characters are the meat of his fiction. Ideas are the oil in which it cooks, heated by the fire of the creative imagination. The oil is important and necessary, of course, but it is the meat
that is the chef’s main concern. In “‘The Finest Story in the World,’” the two major characters converse and interact in several scenes that could be effectively performed on the stage. If we can imagine the work so enacted, that is, as a drama (perhaps a one-act play consisting of, say, eight or nine scenes) featuring two very different personalities with their own private and highly different agendas in conversation with each other (and asides by the narrator), the primacy of characterization becomes apparent.

It is difficult to believe that Kipling was being completely earnest in his treatment of the two main characters of this little drama, the narrator and Charlie Mears, although in commentaries on the story, they—especially the narrator—are viewed as entirely serious portrayals. The narrator passes himself off as an upstanding and accomplished writer who has made a substantial reputation for himself, but some things about him do not ring true. He does not hesitate to appropriate a story line from a young literary hopeful. To be sure, he does not steal the idea. He pays Charlie for it before he even suspects that the young bank clerk is remembering a past life. There is something slightly off-key, something a bit unseemly, about an author of supposedly high stature paying an aspiring young unpublished writer to supply him with something to write about.\textsuperscript{14} He seems less like an established and gifted author and more like an arrogant mediocrity: “It would be folly to allow his [Charlie’s] thought to remain in his own inept hands, when I could do so much with it.”\textsuperscript{15} Ironically, as he goes about trying to “do so much with it,” he himself appears to be the ineffectual amateur that he perceives Charlie as being.

The narrator’s announced determination to write what he refers to as “the finest story in the world”—writers worth their salt simply do not think or talk that way; they would not use a phrase like that—increases substantially the shadow of fraudulence that hangs over him and injects an almost mock heroic irony into the work. As his account of events progresses, it seems evident from what he judges as constituting a great work of the imagination and from the way he goes about preparing for the creative act of composition that he simply is not up to such a stupendous task even if he had all the information he thinks he needs. Given his characterization, it is clear that he could never write the finest story in the world or anything close to it, though one would not know it by his hubris. The final words we hear from him, charged with the irony that awakens, summarize the situation: “Charlie had tasted the love of woman that kills remembrance, and the finest story in the world
would never be written.” The narrator means that he cannot write the finest story in the world because Charlie, now obsessed with a young woman, will furnish him with no more details about his past lives, details needed for him to finish what he wishes to write. That is what he means, but what he is really communicating is that the story will not be written, could not possibly be written, not because of Charlie but because of him. The striking irony arising from his closing remark is that he has revealed during his narrative that he is just as incapable of writing the finest story in the world as is the young man whom he has denigrated and patronized, the would-be writer from whom he purchased a “notion” because he felt that only he could bring it to fruition. And that, presumably, is the reason that Kipling placed the title of the story in quotation marks.

A good many of the titles of Kipling’s works are so designated. A study of them reveals three principal reasons for his enclosing them in quotation marks. The first is that the title is an actual quotation, sometimes from the Bible, sometimes from Shakespeare or other sources. “‘Yoked with an Unbeliever’” (1888), for example, is a quotation (slightly altered) from II Corinthians 6:14. “‘Bread upon the Waters’” (1896) is from Ecclesiastes 11:1. “‘Their Lawful Occasions’” (1903) comes from the prayer book of the Church of England (under “Forms of Prayer to be Used at Sea”). “‘Proofs of Holy Writ’” (1934) is quoted from Shakespeare’s Othello, III. 3 (1. 326). “‘Tiger! Tiger!’” (1894) is from Blake’s famous poem “The Tiger.” At other times, Kipling placed his titles in quotation marks to signify nicknames. For instance, the title “‘Love-O’-Women’” (1893) is the nickname of the story’s main character, Tighe. Similarly, “‘Brugglesmith’” (1891) does not designate the actual name of a person in the story but the way that character pronounces the section of London in which he lives: Brook Green, Hammersmith. “‘Stalky’” (1898) is a story title taken from the nickname of Arthur Lionel Corkran, the principal mischief-maker of Stalky & Co. The intention to create irony is the third major reason for Kipling’s placing titles in quotation marks. “‘In Ambush’” (1898) is ironic because the men who believe that they have ambushed trespassing schoolboys in reality are themselves ambushed (outsmahted) by those very boys. “‘The Finest Story in the World’” fits into this category of quoted titles inasmuch as the person who uses this grandiose phrase to describe what he intends to write is incapable of carrying out such a high-flown project. Thus the observable difference between the pretentious intention and the inevitable mundane outcome produces the
comic irony that Kipling apparently was after when he used quotation marks to enclose the story’s title.

The potential greatness of the story that the narrator intends to write, as he apparently envisions it, will reside mainly in its plot. His idea of “the finest story in the world” is that it is one in which there is “extravagant and bloodthirsty adventure, riot, piracy, and death in unnamed seas.” He trembles with excitement at the prospect of writing about a hero’s revolting “against the overseers, to command of a ship of his own, and the ultimate establishment of a kingdom on an island.” It sounds like a boy’s adventure story rather than a profound literary masterpiece. It is no wonder that one of the books that the narrator lends Charlie is *Treasure Island*. His standard for what makes for greatness in literature—an exciting plot of high adventure—immediately marks him as a pretender to the extent that he passes himself off as a major writer. He seems to assume that once the plot is adequately conceived, all the rest will follow easily. He thus stands in stark contrast to Shakespeare in “‘Proofs of Holy Writ.’” As Kipling characterized him in that story, Shakespeare held the opposite view. He did not worry about inventing new story lines because he considered them merely the frame for powerful words, words that surprise, reveal, and move: “‘But to hatch new plots is to waste God’s unreturning time like a—’—he chuckled—‘like a hen.’” Shakespeare regarded plot merely as the “bones of any stuff.” His goal was to “cover ’em” with the words that matter, for it is the words that make for a great work of art. “It is only words—nothing but words,” Kipling told his audience in an address to the Canadian Authors’ Association, “that live.”

The profound difference between a second-rate writer and the Shakespeare whom Kipling iconically portrays in “‘Proofs of Holy Writ’” is dramatically pointed up late in “‘The Finest Story in the World’” when the narrator goes over all of his notes taken as he has listened to Charlie tell of his past lives and is deeply disturbed for a reason that would not bother Shakespeare at all, namely that the story line is not new. He realizes that all this has been written about before; therefore, he feels at this moment that there is nothing left for him to say: “There was nothing that might not have been compiled at second-hand from other people’s books…. The adventures of a Viking had been written many times before; the history of a Greek galley-slave was no new thing, and though I wrote both, who could challenge or confirm the accuracy of my details?” Unlike Shakespeare, he must have new “notions,” and that difference is truly telling.
When he first hears Charlie’s “notion”—the thought has not yet come to him that the bank clerk is remembering past-life experiences—he immediately believes it to be the essence, the very heart and soul, of a story of nonpareil magnitude. “I looked at him [Charlie],” he relates, “wondering whether it were possible that he did not know the originality, the power of the notion that had come in his way? It was distinctly a Notion among notions. Men had been puffed up with pride by ideas not a tithe as excellent and practicable.”

He does not seem to know that a “notion” does not a fine story make. It is highly significant that in attributing to the narrator of “‘The Finest Story in the World’” an almost fanatical eagerness to base a story on an episode from real life (and to overvalue vastly the artistic potential for such an episode because it is not invented but is from real life), Kipling was satirizing a tendency in himself, for he was a great notion-hunter. In a letter of 28 July 1894, he wrote to Robert Barr, editor of the Idler, that he currently was sitting on “a sort of nest of notions,” several of which he proceeded to describe.

Unlike the narrator of “‘The Finest Story in the World,’” however, Kipling did not lose sight of the danger of becoming so fascinated with the details of the event that plot becomes the raison d’être of the work. He has the protagonist of his novel The Light That Failed (1891) speak out against overemphasizing the role of the “notion” (or plot) in the creative process. The mediocre artist Maisie has come up with a notion that she believes will result in a true work of art. She exclaims to Dick: “Can’t you see what a beautiful thing it would make?” Her judgment, clearly faulty, is parallel to that of the narrator in “‘The Finest Story in the World.’” “Any fool can get a notion,” Dick responds with some heat. He reflects Kipling’s conviction that greatness requires more than just an exciting notion. “You haven’t the power,” he tells Maisie bluntly. “You have only the ideas.”

Irony follows on irony in “‘The Finest Story in the World’” as the speaker—strikingly similar to Kipling himself in some ways as we shall see—increasingly reveals his naïveté about what makes a great work of fiction. The narrator depicts himself as a kind of half-willing tutor to a younger man who wishes to learn how to write and to become such a notable author as he, but oddly he appears to be less a lover of literature than the young man. Charlie’s somewhat naïve but genuine enthusiasm for the poetry that he reads, thanks to the money he receives from the narrator, is in strong contrast to the narrator’s mocking, world-weary attitude toward those writings. Charlie’s excitement
over certain phrases in the poetry of Longfellow does not impress the
narrator but annoys him. The bank clerk is so taken with the lines in
Longfellow ("Only those who brave its [the sea’s] dangers / Compre-
hend its mystery") that he "repeated [them] twenty times, walking up
and down the room and forgetting me." What Kipling is doing here
is contrasting Charlie’s enthusiasm with the cynicism of the narrator,
who remarks: "He shook me by the shoulder to make me understand
the passion that was shaking himself." Charlie is definitely more devious
and more worldly-wise than the narrator perceives him to be, but
it is clear that he possesses a genuine passion for the words that stir
one’s heart. Impatient with the narrator’s failure to make even a begin-
ning toward writing the finest story in the world, Charlie asks him a
question that resounds with implications. Referring to the authors he
has been reading, Charlie asks: "Why don’t you write something like
theirs?" The correct answer: he cannot.

The reason that he cannot is that he is creatively paralyzed by his
preoccupation with detail and accuracy. It is as if Kipling is laughing
at his own strongest proclivities but with something of a self-warning
as well. Despite Charlie’s insistence that he do so, the narrator cannot
get on with writing the finest story in the world because of his hunger
for absolute accuracy and his insatiable thirst for detail. He has become
the John D. Rockefeller of detail. If asked how much detail is enough
in a work of fiction, he would probably answer, “just a little more”
as Rockefeller reportedly did to the question “How much money is
enough?” He can never have too many facts; he can never be too con-
fident that he is being accurate in what he writes. He is never happier
than when he is gathering facts and verifying them. Anticipating that
more detail from Charlie is in the offing and that all he has so far
is verifiably true, he exhibits that comic ecstasy, capering “among the
dumb gods of Egypt,” arrogantly laughing “in their battered faces” at
their powerlessness to hinder him in his pursuit of the finest story in the
world. He has become convinced that what he is getting from his infor-
mant is completely accurate because it is original; that is, it is coming
from Charlie’s actual experience in another lifetime rather than from
hearsay or information contained in books. Kipling’s own respect for
originality and his admirable determination always to be original have
been intensified in the narrator to such an extent that at times he comes
across as a ridiculous figure, a kind of fraudulent Kipling manifesting
his signature traits but in highly magnified form.
Those traits—a constant search for originality, insistence upon adequate (often technical) detail, and meticulousness about accuracy—are everywhere apparent in Kipling’s writings. As a rule, he felt blessed to have developed them. Looking back on his career in *Something of Myself*, he attributed in large measure the hospitality with which he had always been received when visiting abroad and the warm expressions of appreciation for his writings to the fact that his work “happens to be accurate in detail.”

He gave credit for this keen awareness in himself of the importance of detail and accuracy to the first editor under whom he worked in India, Stephen Wheeler. What he “acquired of accuracy, the habit of trying at least to verify references,” “I owed wholly to Stephen Wheeler.”

However it came about, this attitude toward details and accuracy became Kipling’s hallmark. Indeed, he came to believe that learning all the facts possible about the subject on which one is writing and making sure that all details are absolutely accurate could actually create inspiration, could, as he put it, “help one’s Daemon.” When he was gathering material for *Captains Courageous*, his cousin Florence was amazed at the “infinite pains he took to acquire exactness.” In a letter, he asked his friend Dr. James Conland, who had once been a cod fisherman, to be on the alert as he read his manuscript for even the most insignificant inaccuracy in details about the fishery. “I am very keen,” he wrote, “on looking out for mistakes,” and he was haunted by the fear that he may have gotten some detail wrong. Since a train ride is described in the novel, Kipling wrote to a railroad executive whom he knew for details, and “the most excellent man” “sent a fully worked-out time-table, with watering halts, changes of engine, mileage, track conditions and climates, so that a corpse could not have gone wrong in the schedule.”

What is so striking about “The Finest Story in the World” is that these very traits of Kipling’s that he commented on as essential aspects of his distinction as a writer are made to look somewhat ridiculous insofar as the narrator of the story manifests them. For example, he stops Charlie in the middle of one of his descriptions of what happened to him in a former life to ask him what it looked like when his ship was sinking and “the sea topped the bulwarks.” He explains that “I had my reasons for asking.” He wants to check Charlie’s account against one he has already obtained. An acquaintance of his “had once gone down with a leaking ship in a still sea, and had seen the water-level pause for an instant ere it fell on the deck.” This man described the sight as “just
like a banjo-string drawn tight, and it seemed to stay there for years.” To get this detail from this person, the narrator claims that he “had travelled ten thousand weary miles to meet him and take this knowledge.” This is perhaps one of those comments in the story that provoked John Bayley to wonder if Kipling might not be just “kidding.” On the one hand, Kipling would certainly have wanted to verify this kind of information for something he was writing, an eyewitness account of an important event (which makes for historical truth), but on the other hand, to travel ten thousand miles solely and expressly to meet a man who could tell you what the sea looks like just before the water flows over the bulwarks—that would be to carry the desire for accurate detail to a preposterous extent. Yet that is what the narrator insists that he did. Lover of accuracy though he was, Kipling would never have been so fanatical.

The logical conclusion, then, is that in “‘The Finest Story in the World,’” Kipling is in large measure satirizing himself. He delineates a person, a writer like himself, who holds the same views as he about such matters as the importance of being able to recognize immediately something exciting and promising to write about, the essentiality of abundant details, and the need to verify all references and facts in order to achieve total accuracy but who follows these precepts to such an extreme that they have seriously affected his vision of what makes a truly “fine” work of literature. The story is an exercise in comic self-parody and to some extent self-deprecation.

This is not the first time that Kipling had made himself the object of humorous derision, that is, made fun of his way of writing and thinking in a sort of comic self-portrait. Especially in his early career, he went through periods of self-examination in which he seriously questioned both his creative abilities and certain aspects of his personality. Perhaps the most notable example of this self-deprecation is “The Last of the Stories,” published some three years before “‘The Finest Story in the World.’” In that work he confesses that he has often been visited by the “Devil of Discontent” who raises in him doubts about his writings. In a dream, he meets all the characters from his stories and sees them not as he conceived them but as they are actually delineated in his works. The difference is so great as to awaken him to the realization that although he had believed he had created a group of real people, he had been in reality only “the master of this idiotic puppet-show” in which the figures “limped and stuttered and staggered and mouthed and staggered.” In another early story, “‘Brugglesmith,’” a note of self-depre-
cation sounds through the comedy, which is the pervasive mode of the
work. The narrator is, presumably, Kipling but with a flaw that he rec-
ognized in himself and worried about—a tendency to patronize others
and to think too highly of himself. Throughout the story, the narrator’s
vanity is evident. When Brugglesmith implores the narrator “to fight
against the sin of vanity,” Kipling is more than likely addressing that
admonition to himself.

He is doing much the same thing in “The Finest Story in the World”
through his self-parodying characterization of the narrator, in whom
“the sin of vanity” and the habit of patronizing are overt. Throughout
his life, Kipling maintained the highest possible respect for the virtue
of modesty, but at the same time it was a constant struggle for him
to ward off feelings of elitism and superiority. When he and his wife
Carrie were living in America during the early years of their marriage
(1892–1896), it appeared to him that fate had adopted him as a favor-
ite son. Consequently, he was in large measure unsuccessful in combat-
ing the conviction of self-importance. The result was a reputation for
arrogance and an unhappy ending to the Kiplings’ stay in Brattleboro,
Vermont. After that, he was a more alert and more valiant warrior in
the battle to defeat conceit and lift high the banner of modesty.

Even before he was married, however, he knew that he had a prob-
lem with the dark ogre of arrogance. He admits to that tendency sur-
reptitiously in “The Finest Story in the World” by way of showing it in
the narrator, who is everywhere characterized as being full of himself.
He is convinced at one point that he has been singled out by the “Lords
of Life and Death” to write the masterwork of all time. He glories in
this role as the anointed one: “I—I alone,” he exclaims, “held this jewel
in my hand for the cutting and polishing.” If there is one aspect of
his personality that manifests itself above all others, it is his attitude
of superiority over Charlie Mears. From his first words to the end, he
patronizes. His stance is that of a man who is a good deal older than
Charlie, an experienced writer who is benevolently trying to advise and
encourage a much younger man who, as he patronizingly puts it, “suf-
fers from aspirations.” Repeatedly he makes it seem that he is a vet-
eran in the trenches of literary endeavor, his protégé an untutored lad
under the thumb of his mother, a mere boy of twenty who is trying to
be something that he cannot be—a successful writer—because he sim-
ply does not have the gift (which the narrator does possess). Through-
out the story, the narrator considers difference in age a central factor
in their relationship. When he comments that Charlie “would call on
me sometimes in the evenings instead of running about London with his fellow-clerks," he sets up a continuing contrast between an older, settled, and successful man and a much younger one who is writhing in the throes of the confusing desires that plague the restlessly immature. In one of his moments of frustration over Charlie’s refusing to cooperate, the narrator thinks of him as “a child—an idle, irresponsible child playing knuckle-bones.”

Here again in his portrayal of the narrator, who makes every effort to give the impression that he is mature, experienced, and wise (especially in comparison with Charlie), Kipling seems to have had himself in mind as he was just a few years before he wrote the story. The patronizing attitude of the narrator toward Charlie recreates almost precisely that of Kipling toward his cousin Ambrose Poynter (1867–1923) in 1889 when Ambo, as he was known in the family, started to visit Kipling in the Embankment Chambers in London for advice about his writing. He had high aspirations of being a major poet, but could not seem to get anything published. The pose that Kipling assumed in dealing with him is exactly reproduced in the narrator of the story, that of an older, sophisticated litterateur patiently putting up with an untalented amateur who manifests all the ardor and unpredictability of youth, an impetuous boy who is smitten with him as his model and hero. With every confidence that this is precisely how Charlie views him, the narrator declares with a remarkable self-importance, one that manages to mix sexism with disdainful hubris: “There are few things sweeter in this world than the guileless, hot-headed, intemperate, open admiration of a junior. Even a woman in her blindest devotion does not fall into the gait of the man she adores, tilt her bonnet to the angle at which he wears his hat, or interlard her speech with his pet oaths. And Charlie did all these things.” Just as Charlie Mears appears to see in the narrator of the story a man who has achieved considerable success as an author, so Ambo saw in his cousin Rudyard a veteran craftsman, and just as the narrator reads (with pain to himself) Charlie’s writings, so Kipling read Ambo’s work and advised him tactfully in the intricacies of publication as well as the ways of the world.

That Kipling duplicated what at that particular time he thought of Ambo in what the narrator of “The Finest Story in the World” thinks of Charlie is evident from certain letters he wrote in 1889 to his friend in India, Mrs. Edmonia Hill. In the first of these letters, he identifies Ambo as “Young Poynter, my cousin aetat [of age] 22,” and he reports that Ambo came to his rooms and talked with him until one o’clock...
in the morning. Then in the guise of a mature and wise man of the world, he leans back and holds forth on the tribulations of a disturbed youth: “The trouble is an old one. Young man in his father’s house, just growing up and inheriting his father’s nervous temperament, unhappy, lonely, doesn’t know quite what he wants. Gave him a sight of good advice…. Has promised to come to me when he has anything on his mind…. Turned him out at 1 a.m. smoked a pipe and went to bed.”

This pipe-smoking, advice-giving sage at that time was all of twenty-three years old (his twenty-fourth birthday came the following month), and the recipient of his wisdom, Ambo, was only slightly younger at twenty-two. In this lengthy letter and in the one that follows, Kipling stresses to Mrs. Hill the fact of Ambo’s youth, referring to him repeatedly as “young Poynter” and portraying himself as if he were the much older man. He writes that “Young Poynter … insists on regarding me as his father confessor.” He takes on the role of a famous author patiently trying to help an ungifted aspirant without hurting his feelings but paying the price for such magnanimity. He tells Mrs. Hill that Ambo “thrust into my hand on leaving his M.S. volume of poems and A FIVE ACT TRAGEDY IN BLANK VERSE! I shall go to heaven for this.”

As if to contrast “Young Poynter’s” pathetic attempts at writing literature with his own sparkling successes, he interrupts his narrative about Ambo at this point to report that Plain Tales from the Hills has made such a hit that Charles Longman, editor of Longman’s Magazine, has asked that he send him “any thing” (he underscored the words), meaning anything at all. In other words, he wanted her to know that he had reached such heights of fame that the editor of a leading periodical was asking him to favor the magazine with whatever he would deign to send its way.

He goes on to say that after he responded to Longman’s request, he sat down with Ambo’s attempts at creative endeavor and “set myself to study the soul of a young man as revealed in his writings of verse. Never before shown to anyone.”

We do not know how Mrs. Hill reacted to Kipling’s embarrassing attempts to make himself appear greatly older and wiser than his cousin, but in retrospect his unbecoming pose becomes almost comical as he pontificates about “the young man of the Nineteenth century”:

Yes, those poems were queer, young Poynter’s, I mean, and not mine. Most of ’em were translations from the Latin and Greek; and the poor boy had evidently been struggling with religious difficulties thro’ it all…. The Sin of the young man of the Nineteenth century appears to be over-self-consciousness and a morbid condition of the nerves. None the less some of the lines of the boy’s
tragedy which is eminently and even stiffly classical, are fine. He seems to have read Shelley and Shakespeare with great diligence and to have not unskilfully borrowed from 'em both. Very naturally he estimates all his poems not by the thing actually put down in black and white but by all the glorious inchoate fancies that flashed through his brain when his pen was in hand.... I will ask him to dinner—or a pipe—and talk things over—verily the soul of a young man is awful cu'rous.45

In these various conferences and interviews with Ambo, Kipling seems actually to have assumed the role that he has the narrator play in “The Finest Story in the World,” namely that of a veteran author, all-knowing and gifted in every aspect of the craft. Kipling was flattered by Ambo’s hero worship, as he took it to be, but more than that, he was gratified to be looked upon as a mature and sophisticated writer. It is not difficult to understand why: he was smarting from the constant references critics were making to his own youth as if he were being praised simply on the basis of his precociousness. When Ambo came upon the scene, Kipling was feeling the bitter resentment that began early in his writing career toward those who repeatedly referred to his young age. After he arrived in England from India, such references were almost omnipresent in reviews of his work. Scanning the first several years of Kipling’s creative production, Henry James pronounced the young phenomenon “shockingly precocious.” He impressed James as “a strangely clever youth who has stolen the formidable mask of maturity.” Although James’s essay, printed as the introduction to Kipling’s Mine Own People (1891), is highly favorable, he could not seem to get over how young the man was about whom he was writing. He finds “the accident of his extreme youth, which, if we talk about him at all, we cannot effect to ignore,” one of Kipling’s most “remarkable” aspects. As his critique continues, he refers again to “his extreme youth,” and to “our young author” whose distinctive traits as a writer are “curious in the highest degree,” that is, in such “a young Anglo-Saxon.” In his concluding paragraph, James calls Kipling “a talent that has got up so early.” He adds: “Mr. Kipling’s actual performance is like a tremendous walk before breakfast.”46

By the time Henry James’s appraisal appeared, with all of its references to Kipling’s “extreme youth,” Rudyard had seen much such commentary, but he did not become inured to it. He considered it an affront that literary commentators could not merely express admiration for his work; nearly always they found the fact remarkable that one so young could write as well as he did. “Precocious” continued to be a favorite adjective describing him. Even those literary figures whom
he considered his early supporters could not leave alone the fact of his youth, and their making such a point of it seemed to him to diminish his stature whether they meant to do so or not. It was as if he were a dog playing checkers: the wonder of such a performance would always derive not from how well the dog played but from the fact that the dog could play checkers at all.

In review after review, Kipling’s age held the spotlight. Even in private communications about this new writer who had suddenly and dramatically appeared on the literary scene as the dawn comes up like thunder out of China across the bay (India, actually), the subject of his extreme youth was commonly referred to in one context or another. A letter to Henry James, dated 29 December 1890, from Robert Louis Stevenson offers a salient example: Kipling was “by far the most promising young man who has appeared” since he himself entered the literary world! “He amazes me,” Stevenson continues, “by his precocity.”

Lang praised Kipling profusely in a review of two early volumes, *In Black and White* (1888) and *Under the Deodars* (1888), but he made a strong point of the author’s age, attributing his freshness and cleverness as well as his cynicism to his youth. He found Kipling’s “knowledge of Indian life” to be “phenomenal in one so young.” Kipling’s resentment at such pronouncements—he wanted it to be known that his knowledge of Indian life was phenomenal, not just “phenomenal in one so young”—grew to such an extent that he began to answer back. Evidently, Lang, Walter Besant, and others had taken upon themselves to caution the talented but exceedingly young and, they thought, inexperienced writer against unscrupulous agents and publishers. In a letter of 20 November 1889, a month or two before his twenty-fourth birthday, he wrote to one of his early supporters, Walter Besant:

All thanks for your kind letter. But Mr. Lang was wrong. I am not young—only “an old man spotted with decaying youth” for I have seven years of Indian journalism behind me and they leave one neither happy nor hopeful. Also I have gotten popularity from my own public across the water so that they all know me and I have suffered from the amiable publisher a little.... Indeed I have signed nothing, promised nothing since my Indian and Australian connections enable me to wait developments with a vast calm. And further when I was an editor and required serial matter for my paper I dealt with publishers as one pork butcher with another and so came to know the difference between their buying and selling prices; per running foot of matter.

Kipling’s ego was offended by their thinking of him as such an innocent, and he responded in friendliness but with corrective information about his already extensive background in handling the business end
of publishing. He wrote a letter to W. E. Henley similar to the one he had recently sent Besant, stating, in effect, that the word *young* really did not apply to him: “I have put seven years of India behind me and they do not make a man younger or more cheerful. Also, luckily, they don’t lead him to believe the protestations of the disinterested publisher or the blandishments of the people to whom a new writer man is as a new purple monkey on a yellow stick.”

These were words of protest demanding his due—words of a man who has been offended. It probably did not take him long to realize, however, that vanity was largely behind his great annoyance with the “precocious” label, that vanity was behind his patronizing attitude toward his cousin Ambo, and that vanity was behind the show-off passages in his letters to Mrs. Hill. As he grew a bit older and married, he no longer was desperate to give the impression of greater maturity. As a consequence, he seems to have developed a great deal more respect for Ambo and began referring to him in a manner entirely different from that in his letters to Mrs. Hill. In a letter of 1 October 1892, he called him “a delightful man” (opposed to “the boy,” the term he used to Mrs. Hill). After Kipling and his new wife moved to Vermont and they were having their home constructed, he wrote a clever letter to Ambo in poetic form, begging him to come to see them and to “work on the house.”

Fairly soon after their new home was completed, the Kiplings thought that they might build a smaller one, a getaway, somewhere on the southern coast of England. On a visit to his parents in Tisbury, he wrote in June 1894 to a friend, May Catlin, about these plans and indicated that his “cousin Ambrose Poynter who is [a] very clever architect” had been commissioned to plan the cottage. As he tells how he and Carrie worked with Ambo to develop the plans, there is not the slightest indication that he has anything but the highest respect for and confidence in his cousin. Of the proposed cottage in England (which, by the way, was never built) and of the architect they chose to design it, he writes: “It ought to be rather pretty; for he has new ideas in his head.”

As Kipling got to know Ambo better and as his respect for him grew, he may well have looked back on what he had written about him in those letters to Mrs. Hill with something akin to self-disgust. His ego was so damaged by all the harping going on about his own youthfulness that he had cherished an opportunity to manifest his maturity. In doing so to Mrs. Hill, he had assumed a pose now possibly embarrassing to him, but he also must have realized that what he had written her about
Ambo was not just made up to make himself appear older to her. That is, he really believed at the time he was meeting with Ambo and advising him what he wrote to Mrs. Hill about him and about himself. It was a sorry performance, and as he looked back on it, he could not have avoided that conclusion.

The narrator of “The Finest Story in the World” is Kipling’s hyperbolized version of himself as he dealt with Ambo at the time when his cousin (with his “aspirations”) was visiting him on Villiers Street in London. His motive in so portraying the narrator was not merely to laugh at himself in retrospect for having assumed such a high-and-mighty attitude toward a man really not much younger than himself, a person who later was to be the best man at his wedding, but also to warn about the perils of arrogance even when one feels strong justification for wishing to assert oneself. His determination to make others stop thinking of him as “precocious,” he must have realized, was an offshoot of egotism, an old enemy that he always wanted to defeat.

If the narrator of “The Finest Story in the World” reflects in an exaggerated manner Kipling’s determination to be original and authentic in his writings and his tendency to be patronizing under certain circumstances, he also manifests in the same extreme manner still another of Kipling’s characteristics: his interest in the occult. Kipling was drawn to the occult, but he clearly understood that such a fascination could have destructive results. Charles Carrington has noted that “the desire to penetrate the occult exercised a strong fascination over Rudyard throughout life, an attraction which he resisted.”

In India he had been exposed to the widespread belief in metempsychosis, and he may well have found himself attracted to the concept. But he was acutely aware of the aura of fraud surrounding Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), the Russian-born founder of Theosophy, which held reincarnation as one of its principal tenets. He recalled in Something of Myself how the newspaper on which he worked in India, the Pioneer, had been “devastated” as a result of its editor’s having become a “devout believer” in Theosophy.

The truth is that Kipling was afraid of embracing any of the claims of Spiritualism or Theosophy because of what he believed to be their dangers to his creative endeavors. In the narrator of “The Finest Story in the World,” he depicts a character with several of his own traits whose fascination with metempsychosis has adversely impacted his literary creativity and transformed him. The comedic substratum of “The Finest Story in the World” floats upward toward the surface when it be-
comes clear that the narrator is not neutral on the subject of reincarnation but a believer in it even before Charlie Mears entered his life. He resembles a Theosophist who is witnessing the most exciting and rarest event of his existence—a past-life regression that is totally convincing. He believes in the transmigration of souls, but he also believes that “the door is shut” to us, that is, that we cannot remember our other lives; therefore, he is inexpressibly excited when he thinks he has discovered a case in which the door for some reason has been left ajar. “Small wonder that his dreaming had seemed real to Charlie,” he states. It seemed real, he reasons, because in his opinion it is real: “The Fates that are so careful to shut the doors of each successive life behind us had, in this case, been neglectful, and Charlie was looking, though that he did not know, where never man had been permitted to look with full knowledge since Time began.”

This comment seems to emerge not from a person who had no belief in metempsychosis before he encountered what he takes to be evidence of it but from one who already knows a great deal about it and fully accepts it. As he continues his remarks, he contrasts himself in his knowledge of and interest in reincarnation with Charlie, who is at first uninformed about it and when he learns a little calls it “rot”: “Above all, he [Charlie] was absolutely ignorant of the knowledge sold to me for five pounds; and he would retain that ignorance; for bank-clerks do not understand metempsychosis.”

His implication, of course, is that he does understand it—completely. Later he introduces Charlie to Mortimer Collins’s Transmigration, a work with which he is highly familiar since he offers “a sketch of the plot.” As solid evidence of his firm belief in reincarnation, he avows: “I also must have died scores of times.”

Although the narrator’s drive to write the finest story in the world is strong, he has, as J. M. S. Tompkins has pointed out, another compelling motivation: “He is even more eager to produce evidence of the multiple lives of men and thus abolish the fear of death than he is to write the supreme historical novel.” He is a writer of sorts, but more importantly he is a believer in metempsychosis, perhaps a Theosophist, whose excitement reaches a peak close to hysteria at times because he thinks he has before him absolute proof of reincarnation.

His extremes of emotion, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to what writers may sometimes experience when they are gathering material for what promises to be an important work. If that were all that the narrator of “The Finest Story in the World” were undergoing, then his pursuit would be compelling. There is something less gripping about a
pursuit to prove the unprovable—that is, to establish, for example, the existence of fairies as did Arthur Conan Doyle, to demonstrate beyond doubt the presence of ghostly figures among us as did the Spiritualists, or to show that souls transmigrate as did the Theosophists. The narrator is on a mission to prove that what he believes about reincarnation is absolutely valid, and that driving compulsion accounts for much of his behavior, some of it comic and hubristic, such as his capering “among the dumb gods of Egypt” when he feels that Charlie will supply him with enough information from the actual past “to make my tale sure,” detailed and completely original so that “I alone would know that it was absolutely and literally true.”

As an example to himself (a warning, perhaps) of how interest in the occult can “devastate” one’s literary efforts, Kipling created a character who has become so enthralled with Theosophy (or at least its belief in metempsychosis) that his desire to prove its validity in a case with which he has involved himself supersedes to his detriment every other motivation for writing.

In the process of trying to validate reincarnation, the narrator becomes one of those “funny fools” Grish Chunder accused the English of being. Kipling had an intense dread of being looked upon in such a way. Yet he could not help being fooled on occasion and taken advantage of. During his childhood years with the Holloway family in what he called the “House of Desolation,” he was repeatedly caught off guard, made to look foolish, and punished until he learned to cultivate caution and distrust. As he reminisced in his autobiography about those terrible years, he indicated that something positive had resulted, for he had learned that a suspicious nature was necessary for self-preservation: “Nor was my life an unsuitable preparation for my future, in that it demanded constant wariness, the habit of observation, and attendance on moods and tempers; the noting of discrepancies between speech and action; a certain reserve of demeanour; and automatic suspicion of sudden favours.”

After his time at Southsea, he experienced a lifelong fear of being ensnared, of being made a fool of. “Constant wariness,” as he called it, was thus demanded. Frank Doubleday, Kipling’s friend and American publisher, remarked in his memoir that the author had “a great fear of making himself ridiculous.” Doubleday related to Christopher Morley that he once came upon Kipling at his home furiously burning papers written in his characteristic handwriting. “For heaven’s sake, Rud,” exclaimed Doubleday (or “Effendi,” as Kipling called him), “what are you doing?” Kipling’s answer was significantly revealing:
“Well, Effendi, I was looking over old papers and I got [to] thinking,—
No one’s going to make a monkey out of me after I die.”  

The concern that Kipling expressed to Doubleday was unquestionably an important element in his desire to be accurate in his writing down to the slightest detail. He felt that if he were caught in an inaccuracy, no matter how seemingly insignificant, his overall credibility would be in question. In *Something of Myself*, he advised young writers: “There are always men who by trade or calling know the fact or the inference that you put forth. If you are wrong by a hair in this, they argue: ‘False in one thing, false in all.’” His preoccupation with privacy can also be seen as in part a result of his anxiety that close scrutiny might reveal that he was guilty of some mistake or misjudgment. He considered wariness so important for dignity, self-respect, and survival that in 1900 he published a story, “The Way That He Took,” in which watchful prudence saves the day.

Keenly understanding the need for wariness so that he would not be made a monkey of, he was still made a monkey of on occasion. He recognized this proclivity in himself and suffered as a result of that awareness. In the passage of his autobiography where he warned aspiring authors against the sin of not checking details for accuracy, he added: “Having sinned, I know.” He considered himself lucky in not being caught in the worst of these lapses in wariness, but he shivered inwardly in the thought that he might have been. While he was living in Vermont, he took a trip to Canada where he met a certain Englishman who told him a fascinating story about body snatching with details that seemed thoroughly plausible because the man claimed that he was speaking from personal experience. Kipling was apparently impressed with the sincerity of the man, so impressed, indeed, that he was, as it turned out, gullible. He wrote up the story with the purpose of publishing it but was saved from doing so when by accident he discovered that the tale had already been told—in *Harper’s Magazine*. He must have felt both intense relief at having avoided the charge of plagiarism and self-disgust at having been taken in by the deceptive young man who claimed to have witnessed firsthand the tale he related when actually he was simply telling what he had no doubt read.

Later in his life, Kipling was made a monkey of when he confided in a young friend, Clare Sheridan, certain opinions he had about America. She subsequently wrote up his remarks and published them in a newspaper article, creating for him a great deal of adverse publicity and causing him much personal pain. Both in the Canadian and in the
Clare Sheridan incidents, he had failed to exercise the wariness that he so valued. Eagerness to write an exciting and original story in the one instance and vanity—the desire to impress a young woman—in the other instance had created in him a dangerous gullibility that in the aftermath of both episodes filled him with self-disappointment. “The Finest Story in the World,” however, predates both these painful lapses in caution, a fact which suggests that when he wrote this fairly early tale, he was aware even then of a tendency in himself to forget one of the most important lessons learned from his unpleasant days in the House of Desolation: the demand for “constant wariness.” To be sure, he did not let down his guard frequently, but when he did, his error was a source of great discomfort to him.

The self-portrait highlighted with satiric ironies that Kipling paints in “The Finest Story in the World” reveals a man subject to misjudging others and to gullibility because the excitement created in him by what he perceives to be the opportunity to write something original and to feel important has blunted his wariness. He is simply not as suspicious of Charlie Mears as he should be. Instead, he has made Charlie into a kind of simpleton, which he certainly is not. He is a much more complex person than the untalented, boyish, impressionable, untutored, unsophisticated would-be writer who the narrator takes him to be. The narrator needs someone like the Charlie whom he creates in his own mind just as Kipling in 1889 needed someone like the Ambo whom he largely invented in order to feed his vanity. That Charlie is not quite what the narrator depicts him as—just as the real Ambrose Poynter was not quite the person Kipling made him out to be to Mrs. Hill—is one of the principal ironies of the story.

Clues that Charlie is neither as boyish nor as dense as his unofficial mentor wishes to believe turn up periodically in the story, but the narrator seems willfully to ignore them. For example, he first encounters Charlie in a public billiard parlor “where the marker called him by his first name, and he called the marker ‘Bullseyes.’” From this circumstance, it seems reasonable to assume that Charlie is a habitué of poolrooms, at least this particular one, because he is on a first-name basis with the marker (the employee who keeps account of the games played), and the marker is quite familiar with him. The question that should immediately occur to the narrator, then, is whether this young man could possibly be a “pool shark” or at least whether he is really as unworldly as one might otherwise think. Kipling’s self-deprecating representation of himself, the story’s narrator, is eager to demonstrate
his worldliness, superior education, and considerable reputation as a writer. Consequently, he simply accepts Charlie’s lame explanation as to why he happens to be in the billiard saloon, namely, just to “look on,” and he condescendingly suggests that the young man “go back to his mother.” Charlie does, indeed, live with his mother, but except in the narrator’s mind, there is no concrete evidence that he is a mother’s boy. That is how the narrator sees him because that is how he wishes to see him. Toward the end of the story when Charlie has fallen in love, the narrator is stunned to hear him say: “I don’t care a damn what she [his mother] says” about his relationship with the girl. The narrator seems to chalk up this comment, which he finds shocking, to the negative influence that the shopgirl is having on him, but it raises the question of whether Charlie was ever the mother’s boy that the narrator perceives him to be.

It thus befits the narrator’s purposes to conceive of Charlie in a certain way, and to alter that conception would be to challenge aspects of his own self-image and convictions. Through the narrator’s cynical and arrogant eyes, what could possibly be viewed as a promising quality in the younger man, his insatiable interest in poetry, is seen as (and is related to readers as) a fault that requires the ultimate in patience and good will to tolerate. Something of a poseur, the seemingly world-weary sophisticate of a narrator is not at all impressed with Charlie’s genuine and avid interest in books. He refers to Charlie’s “ravaging my bookshelves” as if it were an act of crass immaturity rather than what it certainly could be interpreted as—an indication of the young man’s intellectual curiosity. The level of Charlie’s creative ability admittedly does not appear to be high (with one important, even crucial, exception), but the sheer determination and industry that go into producing “poems of many hundred lines, and bulky fragments of plays,” which he gives his new acquaintance to read, are nothing less than impressive though the narrator treats these efforts as a sheer waste of time and bemoans his fate in having to listen to the aspiring young author read all of this rubbish.

Consistently, then, the narrator seems to underrate Charlie just as Kipling underrated Ambo in his letters to Mrs. Hill. This is not to say that Charlie is not somewhat wily and possibly deceptive but there is no evidence that his enthusiasm for books and for writing is anything but genuine. That “spark of the sacred fire,” to use James’s phrase from _The American_, is not all that a writer needs, to be sure, but it is a spark, a beginning, and the narrator treats it with disdain as he witnesses it in
Charlie. When Charlie comes to him breathless “his eyes flaming with excitement” and asks for a place that he might write, the narrator simply asks: “What’s the trouble?” realizing, as he says, “what the trouble was.” The trouble, as he sees it, is that Charlie’s excitement will produce not “something really great,” as Charlie so devoutly wishes, but merely more trouble for him, the narrator, since he will have to read or listen to Charlie read more artless and worthless junk. It is not surprising that when Charlie does actually write something significant, the poem that later became known as “Song of the Galley-Slaves,” the narrator apparently does not recognize that it is a work of originality and rare power. His only response after reading it is a quiet “H’m” and a question about one of the details in the poem.

If the narrator fails to see any promise whatsoever in Charlie, he also misjudges him by regarding him as an innocent. Although he says that Charlie “was curiously careful to let me see that he knew his way about the world,” he is strangely gullible in dealing with the bank clerk, assuming that this “child” knows nothing at all about the world. Evidently, the narrator prides himself on being a good judge of character. He sees Charlie to be totally ignorant of the value of his “notion,” blissfully unaware that his ideas are derived from former-life experiences, and in every way malleable in the right hands (his). He intends to use Charlie. With the deft hand of a master ironist, Kipling creates an undercurrent of suggestiveness, hints here and there that although the narrator believes he is using Charlie, Charlie in reality may be using him. To be sure, Kipling offers no conclusive evidence that this is the case, but its mere intimation is enough to raise questions about the narrator’s version of events, perhaps the most crucial of which is whether it is possible that this wary man of the world is being conned. His eagerness to have Charlie Mears be a certain type of young man, his compulsion to find a subject to write about that would shake the world with the truth that we have all lived before, and his obsessive determination to make that story totally convincing by including a plethora of authentic details may well have so distorted his judgment as to make him comically naïve.

The possibility that Charlie the frequenter of the billiard saloon is also something of a trickster arises largely from contradictory statements and behavior in regard to his reading: he does not read; he is an avid reader. After he shrewdly closes a deal with the narrator in which he signs over his ownership of the “notion” he has summarized, he then responds to a question about what he has been reading. Not yet aware
that reincarnation may be involved, the narrator asks Charlie if he got his idea from a book. He answers: “I haven’t any time for reading, except when you let me sit here, and on Sundays I’m on my bicycle or down the river all day.” Later he tells the narrator: “I’m reading all the books I’ve bought. They’re splendid.” How is it, one wonders, that Charlie had no time to read before he receives money to buy books of poetry but finds a great deal of time to read after he purchases these volumes? This question never seems to enter the mind of the narrator, who is satisfied with Charlie’s response that he is not really a reader because that particular answer confirms the idea that the eager would-be poet is really just an empty-headed bank clerk.

Time and again certain remarks of Charlie’s cast doubt on his veracity but seem not to raise questions in the narrator’s mind. When Charlie gives various details about ancient galleys and what it was like to be a slave on one of them, the startled narrator asks him: “How do you know that?” His answer is striking: “It’s in the tale.” At this point one would think that surely the narrator should have stopped him to ask, “What tale?” but he does not. Yet, “It’s in the tale” is an exceedingly odd thing to say unless it refers to a story that Charlie has actually been reading (despite his protestations that he does not read much) and has inadvertently allowed this information to slip out.

Charlie’s responses become even more suspicious as the narrator asks him again: “Where have you been reading about galleys and galley-slaves?” His answer this time directly contradicts what he claimed earlier: “Nowhere that I remember. I row a little when I get the chance. But, perhaps if you say so, I may have read something.” Previously he was insistent that he does little or no reading except when he is in the narrator’s rooms, that he has no time for it even on his day off, Sunday, which he spends on his bicycle or at the river; therefore, he could not have gotten any of the details that he gives the narrator from a book. The narrator has not yet come up with the idea that Charlie is remembering past lives and is increasingly curious as to how this young man could possibly know so much about Greek galleys. Sensing this, Charlie does not quite know which way to go—does he say that he reads, or does he say that he does not read? If he is still adamant that he does not, the narrator may think that he is just making all this up and may tend to discredit him. If he admits that he does read, then the narrator may conclude that Charlie’s information is old material and may lose interest since it has already been published in some adventure story or another. The crafty young bank clerk plays it both ways: he admits to
an interest in rowing and offers the possibility that his information *may* have come from something he read—may or may not have.

This maneuver keeps the narrator on the string, as it were, until Charlie comes forward with a piece of paper on which he has written something in a foreign language. Naturally, the narrator assumes that this unlettered youth could know nothing of a foreign tongue. He thus concludes that the writing is irrefutable evidence that Charlie is remembering something from one of his past lives, words in a language he once spoke. Yet a careful review of their conversation reveals that Charlie seems shrewdly to be leading his listener on, pretending not to know what he is doing but in reality stoking the fire of the narrator’s eagerness to be sure that the door of a past existence is being opened before him. The conversation is initiated with the narrator’s asking Charlie: “Did you make up anything else?” He uses the words “make up” because Charlie himself had just indicated that after the narrator loaned him *Treasure Island* to read, he “made up a whole lot of new things to go into the story.”²⁷ The words vibrate with irony, for though we cannot be sure, that may be exactly what Charlie is doing—making up things. The answer that Charlie gives is calculated to pique the narrator’s curiosity and compel him to ask for more information: “Yes, but it’s nonsense.” The possibility that irony is at work here increases, for though the narrator does not believe Charlie when he says that what he is about to explain is “nonsense,” in truth that may be precisely what it is.

Charlie’s explanation as to how he came to write down what is on the slip of notepaper should be considered in the context of what he desires to take place, that is, what it is that he seems to be up to. Although he has sold his “notion” to the writer whom he happened to meet in a billiard saloon, he retains an avid interest in what he calls “the story,” by which he means “our story,” and he greatly desires that it be published because he evidently wishes to profit by its sales. Periodically he brings up to his collaborator, as he appears to consider him, the question of money. The narrator comments that whenever Charlie alludes to what the two of them are working on, it is “always as a story from which money was to be made.”²⁷ He even proposes a division of the profits: “I think I deserve twenty-five per cent, don’t I, at least,” he boldly declares. “I supplied all the ideas, didn’t I?”²⁸

It is clear that the only reason Charlie is so insistent the narrator get on with the job of writing the story and is so annoyed because he does not is that money is at stake. “Aren’t you ever going to finish that
story,” he asks the narrator, “and give me some of the profits?” As Charlie himself admits, the idea of what he wanted to express on that slip of paper did not come to him in a dream or in some sort of trance. He was in bed thinking about money—profits from “the story,” his and the narrator’s. “Well,” he confesses, “I was thinking over the story, and after awhile I got out of bed and wrote down on a piece of paper the sort of stuff the men might be supposed to scratch on their oars with the edges of their handcuffs. It seemed to make the thing more life-like.” In other words, anxious to do what he could to make “the story” more realistic and thus more profitable—a better seller—he thought up the notion of including what a slave might have scratched on his oar. Although he protests that the strange marks on the paper are merely “a lot of scratches,” he then gives away his purpose for bringing it with him to give to his collaborator—that is, after he has craftily aroused in the narrator an intense desire to see this new evidence of possible metempsychosis. The reason is that he wants the “scratches” to serve as an epigraph for their “book,” as he now calls it. Eagerly he suggests to the narrator: “We might have ’em [the foreign words] reproduced in the book on the front page.”

How would Charlie, this self-proclaimed nonreader (who is in truth an avid reader of poetry and perhaps other forms of writing), know about the use of epigraphs and their effectiveness? Where could he possibly have encountered a work with an epigraph in a foreign language? And did his knowledge that certain rowers in galleys scratched words on their oars really come from his memory of a past life or from something he had been reading? The narrator does not ask these questions, but he nevertheless furnishes a possible answer, for he states that Charlie has been reading and is greatly impressed with the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. One of Longfellow’s poems, “The Broken Oar,” includes an epigraph, written first in a foreign tongue (Icelandic) followed by the English translation. Charlie could have derived from Longfellow’s poem not only the idea of men expressing their weariness by carving words on an oar but also the notion of having an epigraph for “the book” and to have it mean, as Charlie puts it, “I’m beastly tired,” which is essentially what Longfellow’s epigraph means: “Oft was I weary when I toiled at thee.” The expert from the British Museum translates the markings on the paper Charlie gives the narrator as “I have been—many times—overcome with weariness in this particular employment.”
Whether Charlie knew enough of rudimentary Greek to produce these words or managed to get someone else to write them remains a mystery. Kipling gives no clues. Of course, the usual reading of this episode may be what was actually intended, that the “corrupt Greek” message came from Charlie’s memory of a past life. If so, it remains a puzzle why Kipling would have made Charlie’s note so similar to what is in the poem by Longfellow, whose work the bank clerk was reading with breathless admiration. Indeed, Charlie’s notion of “the sort of stuff the men might be supposed to scratch on their oars” seems to come right out of “The Broken Oar,” for it is about just that. In part, the poem reads:

The billows rolled and plunged upon the sand,
   The circling sea-gulls swept beyond his ken,
   And from the parting cloud-rack now and then
   Flashed the red sunset over sea and land.
Then by the billows at his feet was tossed
   A broken oar; and carved thereon he read:
   “Oft was I weary, when I toiled at thee.”

What Charlie may well have done is to take from Longfellow’s poem the idea of a Scandinavian rower carving during his leisure moments an expression of his weariness on a broken and discarded oar and to use that notion for his own purposes. It does not work well for him, however, for Greek galley slaves, unlike the free men who rowed on Scandinavian vessels, had no leisure time to carve, and Charlie’s explanation that they could etch certain sentiments on their oars “with the edges of their handcuffs” seems far-fetched inasmuch as shackles and chains do not serve well as implements with which to transfer messages onto the wood of the oars to which the slaves are attached while overseers are constantly observing them. Naturally, the narrator, transfixed into gullibility by his obsession with reincarnation sees no difficulty with Charlie’s explanation.

Not everything that Charlie comes up with to convince the narrator that he is telling of experiences from past lives can be attributed to what he may have been reading, but some of it certainly can be as in the instance of Longfellow’s “The Broken Oar.” As he moves on from describing his life as a Greek galley slave to suggest that he was a Viking accompanying Thorfin Karlsefne a thousand years later in his “sailing to Wineland, which is America, in the ninth or tenth century,” Char-lie’s most impressive “memory” is perhaps suggested in an episode in which he histrionically flings out his arms on a bridge, laughs bois-
terously, and declaims: “When they heard our bulls bellow, the Skroelings ran away!”

The narrator knows exactly what Charlie is referring to because he has read about the historical occurrence involving the Skroelings, and he is now convinced beyond the slighted doubt that he is witnessing past-life regression.

Again, Charlie may or may not be remembering an event that happened to him in a previous existence; it is possible that he is reciting a line from something he has read. By the time this incident occurs in “The Finest Story in the World,” Kipling has made it clear that Charlie is given to retaining in his head lines he has read that have impressed him and repeating them from memory, as he does Longfellow’s “Only those who brave its dangers / Comprehend its mystery.” At such moments he seems to be so abstracted that he is unaware that anyone else is present. When he recites the lines from Longfellow, he is “walking up and down the room and forgetting me,” the narrator states. The later episode in which Charlie becomes oblivious to the narrator’s presence and, taking on a serious and “shrewder” expression, declaims that “When they heard our bulls bellow, the Skroelings ran away!” is so similar to the earlier event in which he forgets about the narrator and recites from Longfellow it raises the distinct possibility that both times (not just in the first episode) Charlie is recalling something from his reading, not something from a past life.

Throughout “The Finest Story in the World,” a work generally supposed to posit the validity of reincarnation, a haunting question persists: is Charlie Mears a simple, naïve youth unaware that his “notions” are actually flashes of memory from former existences, or is he a complex youth who on the one hand is sensitive to the power of poetry and somewhat talented himself but who on the other hand is a shrewd reader of people who can deceive and manipulate them for his own purposes? Ultimately, the issue of Kipling’s stance on reincarnation is almost irrelevant, for the story is not really about metempsychosis. We never know for sure whether Charlie is a simpleton or a confidence man. The important point is that the narrator never even asks the question. The focus is on his comic gullibility, which blocks the doubts and the questions that he should raise about Charlie.

§ § §

In a discussion meeting of the Kipling Society on 11 November 1959, in which “The Finest Story in the World” was one of the topics, a certain “older member” of the group “admitted reluctantly” that
“she found the personality of the narrator not at all likable, showing a sort of easy patronage and a tendency to belittle the less well-educated man.”89 She was reluctant to mention this reaction because she, like countless other readers, assumed him to be a faithful version of Kipling inasmuch as he obviously shares many of the author’s ideas and tendencies, and the last thing she wanted to do was to claim that Kipling was not “likable.” So this older member of the Kipling Society was puzzled. Why would Kipling create as the main character a person so like himself but who is in several respects unlikable? There is no record of her having received responses to what is perhaps the most crucial question arising from a careful consideration of the story.

The answer, which strangely has not been previously forthcoming, is that the narrator of “‘The Finest Story in the World’” is in a sense the author but not a faithful version of him. He is the man that Kipling feared he was in danger of being, both a somewhat comic figure made foolish by certain traits intensified to absurd lengths and an unappealing figure characterized by a patronizing attitude and by insufferable arrogance. On the one hand, Kipling is laughing at himself; it is a self-deprecating portrait. On the other hand, the narrator is Kipling’s serious warning to himself inasmuch as the writer he has delineated is not a writer of substance. His ability has been destroyed by what makes him foolish and “unlikable,” as the older member of the Kipling Society expressed it. Kipling knew beyond doubt that one cannot caper among the dumb gods of Egypt with impunity.