

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RUDYARD KIPLING

Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay, India in 1860, when the country was under control of the British Empire. As an “Anglo-Indian,” Kipling grew up with a complicated relationship to both countries—complexities he often explored in his fiction. He attended boarding school in England, where a combination of homesickness and mistreatment turned him towards literary endeavors. He returned to India to finish his schooling, and soon got a job at a small local newspaper in what is today a part of Pakistan. He worked in newspapers for the first six years of his career—from 1883 until 1889—where his first short stories and essays were published. He released six collections of short stories between 1887 and 1889, giving him the success he needed to fully pursue a literary career. He married Caroline Balestie, the sister of an American publisher, in 1892 and spent a few years in America before returning to Britain in 1896. There he became one of England’s most beloved authors, penning the likes of *The Jungle Book*, *Captains Courageous*, and *Just So Stories*. In 1907, he became the first British writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1936, and today is remembered as one of the foremost authors of the late Romantic era.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As an “Anglo-Indian”—the term for a British national living in occupied India—Kipling was deeply influenced by both the occupiers and the occupied. The British Empire controlled India throughout the entirety of Kipling’s lifetime, an occupation typically viewed by contemporaries as beneficial to spreading western “civilization” to exotic or “savage” lands. Of course, the British Raj, as it was called, also inherently oppressed Indian culture and contributed to widespread prejudice and racism against allegedly “uncivilized” locals, elements that manifest in much of Kipling’s writing. His work has often been criticized as being very pro-colonialism, advocating for British rule over other cultures in their native lands. But having witnessed the give-and-take between British and Indian cultures, Kipling also viewed such a process as inherently complex and occupied cultures as possessing value worthy of preservation. He advocated colonialism as a force for good, bringing advancement and improved quality of life to those whom they ruled. That gave his work a nuance that defies simple propaganda and captured some of the intense exchanges that take place when two different cultures come into contact. India declared independence in 1947.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kipling was a writer of the late Romantic era. Stories of the era emphasized the beauty of the natural world, as well as the extraordinary qualities of the individual. Kipling’s work was in keeping with other late Romantic writers such as the famed poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, who wrote about Arthurian knights in *The Idylls of the King* as well as contemporary British soldiers in “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Kipling himself often wrote about military adventures, notably in his short story “The Man Who Would Be King,” and viewed soldiers with an air of hero worship. “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” also bears a strong resemblance to classic Aesop’s fables and fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm. The animals in these stories share human qualities, a method Kipling returned to many times with his *Just-So Stories* and *The Jungle Book*. The natural world influenced Kipling as well, which was in keeping not only with Tennyson, but with earlier poets such as Percy Shelley (“Mont Blanc”) and John Keats (“Ode to a Grecian Urn”).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi”
- **When Written:** 1894
- **Where Written:** Vermont, United States
- **When Published:** 1894
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Fable, Historical Adventure
- **Setting:** Segowlee, a city in Northern India sometime in the late 19th Century
- **Climax:** Rikki-tikki-tavi slays Nagaina in the cobra’s hole
- **Antagonist:** Nag and Nagaina
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Animated Adaptation. An animated version of the story was released in 1975, directed by the great Chuck Jones (who also brought Dr. Seuss’s *The Grinch* to animated life and directed dozens of classic Warner Bros. cartoons).



PLOT SUMMARY

The story recounts the “great war” fought between Rikki-tikki-tavi, a mongoose, and a pair of cobras in the garden of an English family living in the Indian province of “Segowlee.” Rikki-tikki’s name stems from his war cry, which he delivers as he runs through the tall grass.

One day, Rikki-tikki finds himself in the English family's care after a flood washes him out of his burrow and onto the garden path of the family's home. A young English boy, Teddy, finds Rikki-tikki and thinks that he has died, but Teddy's mother suspects he is still alive. They take the mongoose into the house to dry him, and he soon recovers. Being without fear, like all his kind, Rikki-tikki begins to explore the house. He also climbs on Teddy's shoulder, worrying Teddy's mother, but Teddy's father assures her that he won't hurt Teddy; in fact, the mongoose provides protection from snakes. At night, Rikki-tikki sleeps in Teddy's bed, though he ventures out and investigates whenever he hears a noise.

The next day, he sets out to explore the garden, which is still half-wild and overgrown. There, he meets a pair of tailorbirds—Darzee and his wife—who are crying over one of their babies who fell out of their tree. A cobra called Nag ate the chick, and no sooner do the birds mention the snake that he appears. Spreading **his hood**, Nag claims that the god Brahm gave him his black and white markings and tells Rikki-tikki to be afraid. At a sudden warning from Darzee, Rikki-tikki leaps into the air to avoid a sneak attack from Nagaina, Nag's mate. He comes down on his back and bites her, but since he has little experience fighting cobras, he fails to land a killing blow. She's left wounded and enraged, and the cobras vanish into the brush.

On the way back to the house, Rikki-tikki notices a baby cobra in the dust, Karait, threatening to bite Teddy. The baby is much quicker than his parents, making him more dangerous, but Rikki-tikki doesn't know that and swiftly dispatches the baby before it can hurt the boy. Teddy's father comes out to beat the corpse, which Rikki-tikki finds amusing since the snake is already dead.

Teddy's family is quite grateful and the mongoose enjoys the attention, but he knows that the cobras are still out there. When the family goes to bed, he patrols the house, where he meets the fearful muskrat Chuchundra. He's terribly afraid of Rikki-tikki, but he also carries a vital bit of knowledge that he reveals: the sound of snake's scales can be heard moving across the bathroom sluice. Rikki-tikki follows the sound to the source, where he hears the two cobras plotting outside of the house. They intend to murder the humans, causing the mongoose to leave the home and allowing them to rule the garden along with their young. Nag crawls into a water jug to wait for Teddy's father, unaware that the mongoose is nearby.

Rikki-tikki waits until Nag falls asleep, and then strikes at the base of his neck. He hangs on for dear life as the cobra tries to shake him off—only to be interrupted by a blast from Teddy's father's gun. Rikki-tikki is momentarily stunned, but Teddy's father proclaims that the little mongoose has saved them all. Rikki-tikki drags himself back to Teddy's room to sleep, awakening the next morning stiff but ready to take on Nagaina. He returns to the garden, where word has spread about Nag's

death. Rikki-tikki asks Darzee to tell him where Nagaina's egg nest is located, and then asks Darzee to feign injury to draw Nagaina away. Darzee doesn't think it's fair to attack the cobra's nest, but Darzee's wife sees the wisdom in Rikki-tikki's plan and draws the cobra away from her nest by pretending that her wing is broken. The mongoose takes advantage of the distraction and destroys the eggs in the nest.

He's almost finished when Darzee's wife calls to him, claiming that Nagaina intends to kill Teddy and his family. Carrying the last egg as a bartering chip, Rikki-tikki runs back to the house, where Nagaina menaces the humans at their breakfast table. He distracts her with the final egg and avoids her strikes while Teddy's father goes for his gun. Nagaina seizes her last egg and flees into her **cobra hole**, but Rikki-tikki bravely follows her down. Darzee thinks that is the end for Rikki-tikki, but he eventually emerges, having slain the cobra and saved the garden.

The animals in the garden sing the mongoose's praises while he sleeps after his great battle. When he wakes up, he goes back to the house and enjoys food from the table and the affection of the humans. He remains on guard, however, and keeps the household free of snakes from that point on.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rikki-tikki-tavi – The protagonist of the story, Rikki-tikki-tavi is a young, inquisitive mongoose who saves his adoptive English family—and the animals in their garden—from the dastardly cobras Nag and Nagaina. He's described as fearless, self-confident, and, above all, "eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity." That innate curiosity feeds his bravery, which, in turn, helps him stand up to bullies like cobras. His instincts make him a natural fighter and he expresses an innate loyalty to Teddy and his family that makes him a de facto protector of the garden. Still young at the start of the story, Rikki-tikki's lack of experience tempers his formidable combat skills and prevents him from achieving a swift and painless victory against the cobras, but his strength, perseverance, and willingness to take the battle to the enemy make him akin to an English knight. He often grows short-tempered at the foolishness of other creatures in the garden, such as when Darzee is singing a victory song while Nagaina is still alive. In addition, he's capable of duplicity in the name of pursuing justice, as when he bargains in bad faith with Nagaina and her egg, leveraging it to get the better of the cobra. Yet these flaws are overlooked not only because of the greater good he's doing, but because of his positive qualities (such as courage and intelligence) which he diligently deploys to the betterment of all.

Nag – Nag is a cobra, who along with his mate Nagaina, serves as the primary antagonist of the story. He's depicted as

capricious, self-serving, and cruel—readily devouring helpless animals in the garden such as Darzee’s baby and creating fear and panic among the entire community. Along with his wife, he plots to strike against the humans in the house as a way of removing Rikki-tikki and ruling over the garden absolutely. Kipling connects him quite clearly to Indian rather than British culture; Nag is proud of the mark on his hood, for instance, which he claims was given to his people by the Hindu God Brahm. He states this at the same time that he admonishes Rikki-tikki to be afraid of him, linking his connection to Hindu mythology with his ability to terrorize those around him. The association helps cement the story’s colonialist tone and increases the story’s problematic nature to modern audiences. Nag is further depicted as tenacious and cunning, able to use tactical thinking to achieve their goals. For instance, he hides in a water jar in order to ambush and slay Teddy’s father. He also works in absolute tandem with his wife—the only creature (besides the couple’s unhatched eggs) to whom he is loyal.

Nagaina – Nagaina, Nag’s mate, readily joins her husband in terrorizing the garden. She conspires with Nag not only to ambush Rikki-Tikki—striking at him while Nag distracts him—but also to murder Teddy and his family in order to get rid of the mongoose and regain control of the garden. Nagaina shares many qualities with her husband: she, too, is capricious, cruel, underhanded, and happy to rule the garden through fear. Yet despite her irredeemable villainy, she’s still given understandable motives in the form of her eggs: a family of her own which she and Nag wish to raise. That causes Nagaina to attempt a retreat with the egg into her **cobra hole** in the story’s climax, which seals her fate; Rikki-tikki kills her, thus restoring justice and order to the garden.

Teddy – Teddy, the young English boy who first finds Rikki-tikki nearly drowned in a roadside ditch, is pivotal to the story, but less as a character in and of himself than as the focus of the mongoose’s protective nature. The story attributes few specific character traits to Teddy, and what is known comes mostly from inference. For instance, Teddy’s father states, “If Teddy doesn’t pick [the mongoose] up by the tail, or try to put him in a cage, he’ll run in and out of the house all day long.” Because Rikki-tikki does, indeed, run in and out of the house, it’s logical to assume that Teddy treats the animal kindly. He’s an innocent, not unlike Darzee’s baby, and as such is in danger from the cobras. Yet as a child, he’s all but helpless and is rarely aware of the presence of any threats. He also represents the future—that is, the stability, continuity, and an extension of British rule. As such, both Rikki-tikki and Teddy’s father focus on Teddy in their defense of the home and move to keep him safe first—most notably during the final confrontation with Nagaina.

Teddy’s Father – Teddy’s father never receives a formal name, though it’s clear that he is British, and—since the story takes place in a British military compound—likely that he works with the military or government in some capacity. He’s portrayed as

wise but firm, kind but resolute, and with an awareness of the big picture that serves his family well. That is most readily apparent in his observations about Rikki-tikki, as he notes that “Teddy’s safer with that little beast than if he had a bloodhound to watch him.” His foresight provides both his family and animals of the garden with protection against the threat of the cobras. He’s also shown as someone who acts quickly and never hesitates in the face of danger. He moves swiftly to protect Teddy during the final confrontation with Nagaina, for example.

Teddy’s Mother – Teddy’s mother, Alice, is portrayed as emotionally sensitive, soft-hearted, and often reluctant to face the harsh realities of the world around her. For example, when Teddy’s father suggests that a snake might come into the nursery, she “wouldn’t think of anything so awful.” Her qualities are typical for depictions of women at the time, fitting with Kipling’s colonialist, male-dominated view of the world. Her concern can blind her to the presences of allies—she worries Rikki-tikki may bite Teddy, for instance—but her compassion is also shown as contributing to the collective good. This is most evident early on, when she suggests that they take a half-drowned Rikki-tikki into the house to help him recuperate. She eventually embraces the mongoose’s presence in the home and agrees with her husband that the little creature has saved all of them from the menace of the cobras Nag and Nagaina.

Darzee – Darzee and his wife are a pair of tailorbirds who live in the garden. Like many of the animal occupants, they are terrified of the snakes and lack the ability to stop their depredations. Their lost baby, and the grief it causes them, are the most direct sign of the evil the cobras perpetrate in the garden, as well as how helpless most of the other animals are to prevent it. Crying and singing are about all Darzee can do, and the story portrays him as being very foolish—most notably when he sings triumphantly at Nag’s death, even though Nagaina is still on the loose. Darzee’s flightiness and silliness stand in opposition to Rikki-tikki’s practicality, further helping to separate the mongoose from the cobras’ potential victims in the garden. Darzee also does not want to distract Nagaina at the end of the story to help Rikki-tikki attack her nest, believing it’s not fair to kill eggs. His wife, however, takes up in his stead.

Darzee’s Wife – The partner of the tailorbird Darzee, she proves less foolish than her husband. Kipling even calls her “a sensible bird,” and she provides Rikki-tikki with valuable assistance in his final battle against Nagaina. When Rikki-tikki wishes aloud that Darzee would distract Nagaina so that he could destroy the eggs in her nest, Darzee’s wife, who “knew that cobra’s eggs meant young cobras later on,” takes up the task that her husband won’t, and provides the needed distraction by feigning an injury to her wing.

Chuchundra – Chuchundra is a very timid muskrat who lives in Teddy’s family’s house. Rikki-tikki encounters him during one of his nightly patrols, and quickly realizes the muskrat is typical of many of the animal residents of the garden in that he’s terrified

of the cobras Nag and Nagaina. Still, he gives Rikki-tikki invaluable information about deducing the cobras's movements around the home. His fearfulness is contrasted with Rikki-tikki's courage, helping it stand in even starker relief. His desire to help marks him as a member of the larger community—worthy of protection even if Rikki-tikki finds his cowardice and whining irritating.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Karait – The young cobra hatchling, implied to be a child of Nag and Nagaina, whom Rikki-tikki battles in the garden early in the story. His small size in fact makes him *more* dangerous than the older snakes, as he is quicker and harder to catch, but Rikki-tikki defeats him nonetheless.

TERMS

Brahm – Also known as Brahma, the Hindu manifestation of the Supreme Soul, or God.

Coppersmith – Also known as a coppersmith barbet, a type of bird native to India. It's so named because the sound it makes is similar to a coppersmith working metal.

Muskrat – An aquatic rodent, similar to a beaver in some ways. Though native to North America, it has been introduced to other parts of the world, including India.

Segowlee (Sugauli) Cantonment – The setting of the story (Sugauli is the modern spelling) is a city in the north of India, near the border of Nepal. At the time of Kipling's writing, it served as the site of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, which ended the two-year Gurkha War between Great Britain and Nepal. A cantonment is a military base.

Tailorbird – Small birds native to the jungles of Asia. They're so named because they tend to "sew" their nests together using leaves and fibers, kept high in bushes and trees to stay safe from danger.

is at once a wild animal and in possession of a distinctly civilized sense of refinement and loyalty—traits that endear him to the reader and suggest a kinship between nature and human beings. On the one hand, Rikki-tikki possesses a mongoose's basic natural instincts: curiosity, fearlessness, and essential notions on how to fight predators like the two cobras. But he also possesses a loyalty to the British family with whom he lives and repays the kindness they show him by defending them from the cobras' attacks. The family he comes to guard, meanwhile, despite having a certain dominance over the land on which they reside, is ultimately at the mercy of the natural world—a world that steadily creeps into their bungalow in India, however much they try to keep it at bay. Kipling's story thus suggests a certain tension between man and nature—and that the boundary between these worlds is not as distinct as the human beings would like to think.

The natural world—represented by the grounds surrounding the family's home—is fueled by both by animal instinct and many of the traits that define humanity. For example, Rikki-tikki relies on millions of years of evolution to instruct him how to face an enemy he has never seen before and has no experience against. Though "Rikki-tikki had never met a live cobra before [...] he knew that all a grown mongoose's business in life was to fight and eat snakes," Kipling writes, underscoring the mongoose's initial, instinctual drive to fight. Other animals, too, seem beholden to their biological history and impulses; "When a snake misses its stroke," Kipling writes, "it never says anything or gives any sign of what it means to do next."

Yet Rikki-tikki is also described as being "too well-bred to bite or scratch" when he sleeps alongside Teddy, the child of the family who saves him. What's more, all the animals in the story speak to each other and possess distinct personalities. Such anthropomorphizing suggests a merging of the natural and civilized worlds that will prove to be the key to the family's survival in the comparatively wild landscape of India. The human family's separation from nature, meanwhile, is represented by both their inability to communicate with the animals as well as the physical distance between their home and the garden. Yet it quickly becomes clear that the border between the civilized and natural worlds is far more porous than humans believe.

On the surface, the human world is depicted as a loving, orderly place, **full of food** and comfort absent from much of the garden. Teddy's family shows mercy and support to Rikki-tikki by rescuing him after he nearly drowns, for instance. They feed him, provide him with a warm place to sleep, and give him the freedom to run around the house. Yet Rikki-tikki is not the first animal to enter the "civilized" human world: the presence of the muskrat Chuchundra in the bungalow suggests that the border between the house and the garden has long been fuzzy. Nag and Nagaina blur that boundary even further. That the deadly cobras enter the home through a hole for bath water suggests



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.



MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Animals are anthropomorphized—that is, given human qualities—throughout "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," Rudyard Kipling's story of a young mongoose's attempt to protect his adoptive British family from two lurking cobras. The titular mongoose, named for the sounds he makes,

how easily nature can infiltrate human markers of comfort and domesticity.

Rikki-tikki's ultimate triumph against the cobras is only possible because of the arbitrary nature of this boundary. If he were "too civilized"—that is, too focused on the comforts he enjoys in the home—his reflexes would be blunted against an enemy he has never faced before. For example, after his first skirmish against the cobras, "he might have stuffed himself three times over with nice things. But he remembered Nag and Nagaina..." Yet if he were utterly feral, he would possess no loyalty to his human family and would likely move on rather than fighting the cobras on their behalf. Witness, for instance, Teddy's mother's surprise that "a wild creature" could be such a reliable protector for her son.

The natural world aids the civilized world by providing Rikki-tikki with primal instincts that compensate for his lack of experience. This is most strongly seen in the form of his mother, who feeds him dead cobras as a baby and teaches him that cobras are nothing to fear. (Rikki-tikki's mother held a similar position in the home of a British general, so Rikki-tikki himself is essentially carrying on a family tradition.)

The civilized world, in turn, aids the natural world by giving Rikki-tikki benefits he never would enjoy in the wild. That starts with Teddy's family saving Rikki-tikki and nursing him back to health. Upon first seeing the mongoose, Teddy's mother cries out, "that's a wild creature! I suppose he's so tame because we've been kind to him." Here, she seems to think that the way she treats him affects his nature. To be sure, Rikki-tikki later protects the family fiercely, and while some of that is based in his snake-killing instinct, Kipling notes that "very few mongooses, however wise and old they may be, care to follow a cobra into its **hole**."

In the end (thanks to Rikki-tikki slaying the cobras), the civilized world ultimately triumphs over the natural world, allowing everyone to live in peace and harmony: the cobras had been a threat not only Teddy, but his parents and the rest of the garden animals as well. When they're slain, then, the whole garden celebrates: "That set all the birds in the garden singing, and the frogs croaking, for Nag and Nagaina used to eat frogs as well as little birds."

The story presents a world where nature and civilization are in conflict, yet that conflict results in each side bleeding over into the other, and both sides benefitting from the result. Rikki-tikki is a wild animal, but he learns the benefits of protecting a benevolent order. Similarly, the order benefits from allowing a wild animal like him to be true to his nature. In this sense, nature and civilization aren't exactly enemies. They're more like the ends of a scale, and it takes parts of both worlds to ensure safety and security for everyone.



COLONIALISM AS A BENEVOLENT FORCE

Kipling was an Englishman living in India during its period of British occupation. As a result, "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" and similar stories often portray colonialism as a benevolent force: bringing peace, order, and tranquility to a violent and chaotic world. Such attitudes were common and uncontroversial at the time, but both Kipling and "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" have been criticized in recent decades for "whitewashing" the often-cruel realities of life in India under British rule.

Regardless, "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" depicts the British as benevolent rulers, as symbolized by Teddy and his parents. A mongoose is native to India, and the ecology he inhabits is that of the Indian subcontinent. Yet he lives in the home of an English family, who not only grant him his "civilized" demeanor, but represent comfort, intellectualism, and reason's triumph over the violent killed-or-be-killed world around them. In that sense, Rikki-tikki is a "good" Indian—submitting to the will of his white masters—while the cobras are "bad" Indians trying to undermine the white man's rule.

Rikki-tikki begins life as a resident of the wild world and is almost killed by a flood. He's rescued by a white family that appears almost godlike to him, nursed back to health, and given a house full of wonders and comforts to inhabit. He thus quickly learns the benefits of being ruled by the British. Teddy's father in particular is depicted as being benevolent, wise, and almost all-seeing. He reassures Teddy's mother that the mongoose is not a threat and rewards Rikki-tikki with **food** and a run of the house. Perhaps most importantly, Teddy's father understands the danger of the cobras and the value of Rikki-tikki's protection.

Under the tutelage of civilization, Rikki-tikki learns to fight for the common good and use his skills for the benefit of all, something he would not have done had Teddy's "civilizing" family not been kind to him. Similarly, Rikki-tikki's mother—who lived in the home of a British general—once told Rikki-tikki how to behave in order to be trusted by the British. Together these details suggest that, in time, India will not only accept and embrace Britain's rule, but will prosper more under it.

Unlike Rikki-tikki, the cobras are unhappy with Teddy's family in the house, and fight against their rule. As "bad" Indians, they reject the benefits of colonialism and want to return the property to their own control. Kipling links the cobras directly to Indian (as opposed to British) culture when Nag explains how "the great god Brahm"—a Hindu deity—put his **mark on the snake's hood**. Unlike the stable and orderly rule of Teddy's family, the cobras rule by strength and fear, taking what they want and giving no consideration for the other animals sharing their space. They're shown as being particularly hostile to Teddy's family and speak about how wonderful it will be when the house is empty.

While the transition from Indian to English is generally shown as being positive in the story, Rikki-tikki retains important character traits from his mongoose heritage. This suggests that the give-and-take between the British and the Indians is not as one-sided as it appears. Moreover, it suggests that Rikki-tikki's Indian characteristics—his instinctive behavior—can benefit the British if allowed to flourish.

Most obviously, Rikki-tikki uses his wild nature to fight the cobras—moving silently, striking suddenly, and falling back on (Indian) instincts to make up for his lack of experience. As a mongoose, he can move freely and often undetected from the (British) house to the (Indian) garden and back without incident. Teddy's family, on the other hand, wouldn't be able to move so freely without attracting attention, underscoring their separation from both the natural world and the Indian society in which they live.

Even though he appreciates all the things the family does for him, Rikki-tikki still considers them strange and foolish sometimes. Kipling presents this as very hard-headed and sensible, rather than arrogant or conceited. For instance, Rikki-tikki is baffled by Teddy's father's attempt to beat Karait, since the baby cobra is already clearly dead. Thus, even as "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" is definitely pro-colonialism, it also shows a subtlety to the exchange between the occupying British and the native Indians. Both sides benefit from British rule, in the world of the story, but the British can also benefit from Indian culture—often in ways they do not expect.

Of course, Kipling's attitude toward colonialism in the story was subjected to revision as Indians successfully obtained their independence. That granted them an autonomy that Kipling's stories implicitly denied and allowed them to state emphatically that they could stand on their own two feet instead of relying on the British to be ruled. In the process, it made the cultural reach of British colonialism clear—showing how its attitudes could be reflected even in a seemingly simple story about a brave little mongoose protecting a boy.



THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Almost every character in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" is defined by their family and places the safety and prosperity of their family above all else. That starts with Teddy and his parents, who allow Rikki-tikki into their home in part to look after their son. But it also extends to Darzee and his wife, the tailorbirds who are shattered when the cobras eat their child, and to Nag and Nagaina themselves, who dream of ruling the garden unmolested so that their eggs can grow into adult cobras too. Rikki-tikki, who is essentially orphaned, understands the value of family, first from the advice given to him by his mother, and then later under the protection of his "adopted" human family. Even Chuchundra, the cowardly muskrat living in the British family's bungalow, takes care to mention a cousin. Family in the story gives an underlying sense

of urgency that further connects the characters to the larger natural world, in the sense that the survival of children can mean the survival of a species. That links family to Kipling's ongoing interest in the natural world and its harsh nature; family is the ultimate motivation, the story suggests, and characters will defend their own at all costs.

Families are shown as loyal, loving, and stalwart in their willingness to defend each other. They offer comfort, safety, and companionship, and seek to ensure that their children will carry on their traditional ways of life. For example, Teddy's parents allow Rikki-tikki to sleep with the boy because the mongoose will protect him from snakes. Rikki-tikki, in turn, has no family initially but readily adopts Teddy and his parents as his own. He shows them the same loyalty they showed him and repeatedly risks his life to keep them safe; the very mention of the cobras harming the humans fills him with rage.

Despite their villainy, even the cobras are very loyal to each other. Given the importance the story places on family, that the cobras plot together to kill Teddy's family reflects their evil nature—yet even this is somewhat tempered by the fact that they're also desperately trying to protect their own nest of eggs.

Having established how important family is, the story then lets readers contemplate what might happen if families get torn apart. Specifically, the death of a child—and the end of a genetic line—is viewed as a terrible blow, to the point that parents will do anything to keep their children safe. The tailorbirds, having lost one of their babies, are first shown consumed with grief, and the cobras are portrayed as unrelentingly evil for eating their baby. Teddy's mother can't bring herself to think about the dangers a snake might present her child, and Teddy's father reacts suddenly and aggressively when Teddy is threatened—clear evidence of his intense desire to ensure the well-being of his son. The fact that Rikki-tikki is able to bargain with Nagaina—who doesn't normally negotiate—when he holds the fate of her last egg in his jaws reveals the power of familial bonds that bring the cruel, calculating snake to heel.

The importance of family in "Rikki-Tikki Tavi" not only motivates the characters' actions, but also forms the cornerstone of the story's other themes. British colonial rule, for instance, is reflected within Teddy's family itself—with a benevolent authority figure setting rules and pronouncing judgment in the form of Teddy's father—while the harsh natural world is dangerous specifically because it often kills helpless babies who have not yet had a chance to grow. Kipling stresses the importance of family by highlighting the consequences of a family being broken apart, as well as the rewards for the entire community if the sanctity of the family is preserved.



COURAGE AND COWARDICE

Kipling presents Rikki-tikki almost as a knight: brave, virtuous, and dedicated to the safety of others. Indeed, he doesn't seem capable of feeling fear, and treats incidents in which his life is genuinely in danger as actively enjoyable. The fact that he uses that courage to noble ends is part of what makes Rikki-tikki a hero in the eyes of the story. Though no other character in "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" exhibits the same level of courage as the mongoose, the book draws quiet lines between those characters who respond to threats with action and those who are paralyzed by fear. Teddy's father and mother, for instance, are afraid for the safety of their son, but they don't allow that to stop them from acting if they need to. Darzee's wife also risks her life to stop the snakes by serving as a distraction. Chuchundra, on the other hand, is almost completely paralyzed by fear, as is Darzee himself. They are thus not able to act directly against the cobras, and their usefulness is limited to timely advice. Courage, then, is ultimately defined as an active commitment to others—a willingness to risk one's life for someone other than oneself—while cowardice is defined as passively placing one's own safety above anything else.

As the protagonist of the story, Rikki-tikki's bravery is constantly emphasized, to the point where he doesn't seem to understand what fear is. This is seen not only in his stalwart defense of Teddy and his parents, but in his inherent curiosity about the world. His family motto is actually "run and find out" which allows him to fearlessly explore the corners of the strange new environment of the family home, and which allows him to confront the cobras without entirely understanding how dangerous they are. Rikki-tikki is also constantly referred to by his small size, which accentuates his bravery and makes his fearless nature loom all the larger. He fights the cobras even though they outnumber him, and despite the fact that he must often do so solely on his own. Rikki-tikki is also a stranger in his new environment, which puts him at a disadvantage against the cobras (who know the territory much better). Yet he takes on the cobras anyway—to the point of travelling into the dark of a **snake hole** to finish off Nagaina.

Courage is demonstrated as an essentially selfless emotion. Those who act out of self-interest are ultimately shown as cowardly while braver characters are often fighting at the behest of others. The cobras notably always attack by stealth and guile—hiding in the bathroom to strike at Teddy's father, for example, or working in tandem to distract Rikki-tikki and attack him from behind. Rikki-tikki sometimes attacks from stealth too, but not as a matter of course—only when circumstances demand it or as a means of eliminating a disadvantage. (Such as when he attacks Nag in the bathroom by surprise, since, he notes, "if I fight him on the open floor, the odds are in his favor.") The cobras also prey on weak creatures unable to defend themselves, like Darzee's wife and baby child. Rikki-tikki,

meanwhile, never fights helpless opponents—even the baby cobra Karait is dangerous. Like Rikki-tikki, Darzee's wife also places herself in danger for the greater good when she distracts Nagaina by pretending her wing is broken—both for the sake her children, and for all of the other creatures in the garden. Teddy's father, while in less direct danger, still confronts the cobras when he can. He always does so in the defense of his son, rather than acting out of his own concerns.

Courage in the story further becomes a matter of boldness and decisiveness as much as a lack of fear. Rikki-tikki can't simply wait for the cobras to strike; he can't let Nag or Nagaina choose the time and the place to attack. Instead, he has to take the battle to them, as he does by ambushing Nag in the bathroom or arranging to distract Nagaina so he can destroy the cobras' nest. Rikki-tikki also never hesitates when he acts, most notably during his first showdown with the snakes: "Rikki-tikki knew better than to waste time in staring. He jumped up in the air as high as he could go." Teddy's father too, acts resolutely when he needs to, and doesn't stop to waffle over his choices when trouble arises. For example, the moment Rikki-tikki distracts Nagaina at the breakfast table, "Rikki-tikki saw Teddy's father shoot out a big hand, catch Teddy by the shoulder, and drag him across the little table with the tea-cups, safe..." Darzee, on the other hand, can only sing out his emotions. He never takes any steps to act on his fears. The timid Chuchundra is similarly unable to act, nor even to scurry into the center of the room.

Kipling takes care to give courage a noble quality in "Rikki-tikki Tavi," and to separate it from simple self-preservation. Rikki-tikki's courage is noble not just because it is an essential part of his nature, but because he uses it for the greater good of the community. The dangers he vanquishes threatened everyone, and the peace his courage brings is shared not only by the humans he has adopted, but all the animals of the garden.



SYMBOLS

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



NAG'S HOOD

Nag draws deliberate attention to his hood—and more importantly the symbol on it—as a gift from the great god Brahm. It marks Nag as representative of India without British rule: dangerous, cruel, and ruling through fear and superstition. Rikki-tikki stands in opposition to that, and fights to rid the garden of the threat represented by the hood. The deliberate connection between the villain and Hindu mythology marks perhaps the most overt expression of colonialist themes in the story: with the heroic British (represented by Rikki-tikki) fighting to claim India from the darkness and savagery of native Indian culture. It's also one of

the reasons why the work is considered so problematic to modern eyes: an attack on Hindu culture from a member of an occupying force.

Indeed, there's even a bit of savage irony to Nag's story. It entails an act of selflessness and mercy: the symbol was granted because Nag's ancestor shielded Brahm from the heat of the sun. Nag tells the story in the wake of eating the tailorbirds' baby and in the same statement he demands fear from Rikki-tikki. Kipling seems to suggest that, by defying the British order that Rikki-tikki is defending, the cobra is making a mockery of his own Indian heritage.



HUMAN FOOD

The food from the human table is presented as a reward for Rikki-tikki, along with being petted by Teddy and his parents and being allowed to sleep in Teddy's bed at night. As such, it symbolizes the benefits (in Kipling's understanding) of British colonization: a luxuriant lifestyle that provides comforts and delights that wouldn't be possible without the occupation of India. Rikki-tikki couldn't hope to enjoy food from the table as a wild mongoose, and his life would likely be considerably less comfortable. Yet the same rewards he enjoys for accepting the authority of Teddy's family can make him soft. Rikki-tikki refrains from eating the food at the human table while the cobras Nag and Nagaina are on the loose, for instance. Kipling thus seems to be saying that the very luxuries "civilization" provides can blunt the instincts needed to defend it. Rikki-tikki therefore needs to be sparing in his enjoyment of these luxuries, at least until the threat of the cobras—that is, of Indian "savagery"—is removed.



THE COBRA HOLE

The cobra hole is the spot beneath the ground where Nagaina retreats in her final battle with Rikki-tikki. It's also the location of the story's climax, where Nagaina is at her most dangerous but where victory will be final and absolute. In this way it symbolizes the ultimate test of Rikki-tikki's bravery, the essential darkness he must defeat to fulfill of his status as a hero.

Rikki-tikki is essentially on the "Hero's Journey," a template for mythic storytelling first postulated by philosopher Joseph Campbell. The pattern can be seen again and again from stories all over the world, from the ancient Greeks to modern stories like *Star Wars* and [The Hunger Games](#). In these stories, the hero always travels to a strange and dangerous land, in search of a cure for some ailment afflicting the community. It culminates with a final confrontation in a place of darkness, where the hero is alone and deprived of any allies or special gifts.

In "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," the dangerous land is the garden, the threat is the cobras, and the hole is that final place where the

evil is defeated once and for all. Rikki-tikki is sometimes likened to a knight, and Kipling describes him with knightly virtues like bravery and selflessness. If so, then the cobra's hole is the dragon's lair. It's Nagaina's home turf, after all, and "very few mongooses, however wise and old they may be, care to follow a cobra into its hole." Only there, where his opponent's power is at its height, can the final blow be struck.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Puffin edition of *The Jungle Book* published in 1984.

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi Quotes

☝☝ It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, because he is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity. The motto of all the mongoose family is "Run and find out," and Rikki-tikki was a true mongoose.

Related Characters: Teddy's Father, Teddy, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, after Rikki-tikki has washed up outside the home of Teddy's family and the humans have nursed him back to health, Teddy's father tells his son not to frighten the mongoose. Yet, as the narrator immediately notes, this isn't likely to happen due to the animal's fearlessness—something he is simply born with.

Kipling explore the idea of nature vs. nurture quite a bit in the story. Rikki-tikki is the product of two worlds and gains valuable skills and abilities from both. In this case, Kipling is very clear about what he gains simply from being a mongoose: fearlessness created by innate curiosity. In addition, that curiosity suggests a hunger for knowledge. "Run and find out" implies that "finding out" is a useful survival tool and can lead to an improved understanding of the world. Knowledge and enlightenment are supposed to be British qualities—at least from a colonialist perspective—yet here Kipling clearly suggests that Rikki-tikki's desire to learn about the world around him isn't something conveyed to him by the British, but rather is a part of his own nature. Considering that he is a native Indian creature, this it shades Kipling's pro-British point of view with some interesting complexities.

“I suppose he’s so tame because we’ve been kind to him.”
 “All mongooses are like that,” said her husband. “If Teddy doesn’t pick him up by the tail, or try to put him in a cage, he’ll run in and out of the house all day long. Let’s give him something to eat.”

Related Characters: Teddy’s Father, Teddy’s Mother (speaker), Rikki-tikki-tavi, Teddy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

After Rikki-tikki jumps up on Teddy’s shoulder and tickles under his chin, Teddy’s mother assumes that the family’s kindness has had a civilizing influence on the mongoose. This is another moment where two worlds—nature and civilization, or more specifically, British and Indian—come together. Teddy’s father, the patriarchal Englishman, is shown as wise and far-seeing. By encouraging his family to treat Rikki-tikki well, he’s helping to ensure the protection of his house from a dangerous threat (the cobras), even though that threat hasn’t manifested itself. But again, Kipling shades that equation very subtly. Teddy’s father doesn’t give Rikki-tikki those tame qualities needed to keep the family safe. He simply understands that Rikki-tikki—an Indian mongoose—already possesses those qualities, and that he need only support and encourage them to reap the benefits.

“I don’t like that,” said Teddy’s mother. “He may bite the child.” “He’ll do no such thing,” said the father. “Teddy’s safer with that little beast than if he had a bloodhound to watch him. If a snake came into the nursery now—”

Related Characters: Teddy’s Father, Teddy’s Mother (speaker), Rikki-tikki-tavi, Teddy

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Teddy’s mother is concerned that Rikki-tikki has taken to sleeping in Teddy’s bed and standing guard on the boy’s pillow. As Teddy’s father points out, this is actually another

of the benefits Rikki-tikki brings to the household in that he can protect the child. Of course, this moment also reinforces the patriarchal order of British rule. Father knows best, while mother is foolish and a little flighty. On a more immediate level, it’s a manner of foreshadowing as it sets up the conflict to come between the mongoose and the cobra family. Finally, it reflects the story’s themes of family and courage, as Rikki-tikki has already begun to reveal his bravery and desire to protect his adoptive human relatives.

He sat on all their laps one after the other, because every well-brought-up mongoose always hopes to be a house mongoose some day and have rooms to run about in; and Rikki-tikki’s mother (she used to live in the general’s house at Segowlee) had carefully told Rikki what to do if ever he came across white men.

Related Characters: Teddy, Teddy’s Father, Teddy’s Mother, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

As the family has breakfast, Rikki-tikki takes turns sitting on the family members’ laps. In addition to further illustrating Rikki-tikki’s calm and affectionate nature, this passage expresses another facet of Kipling’s colonialism: the British occupying India are making changes that resonate over time. Rikki-tikki trusts white men because his mother trusted white men and passed that trust on to him. Notice too that his mother also stayed in the house of a general; while his militarism is more implied than stated, Teddy’s father owns a gun and is likely a government official. This generational shift moves away from soldiers, the military, and fighting to something more orderly: occupation and government control. Part of that process means encouraging trust in the natives, as the British do for both Rikki-tikki and his mother. By fostering such trust, Kipling suggests, both sides can reap considerable benefits.

Then inch by inch out of the grass rose up the head and spread hood of Nag, the big black cobra, and he was five feet long from tongue to tail. When he had lifted one-third of himself clear of the ground, he stayed balancing to and fro exactly as a dandelion tuft balances in the wind, and he looked at Rikki-tikki with the wicked snake's eyes that never change their expression, whatever the snake may be thinking of.

"Who is Nag?" said he. "I am Nag. The great God Brahm put his mark upon all our people, when the first cobra spread his hood to keep the sun off Brahm as he slept. Look, and be afraid!"

Related Characters: Nag (speaker), Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time that Rikki-tikki meets the cobra Nag, who has been terrorizing the resident of the garden. Beyond introducing one of the story's main villains, Kipling's specific description of Nag here has colonialist overtones. If Rikki-tikki is a "good" Indian—that is, one who readily takes to the "civilizing" influence of the British—then the cobras are certainly "bad" Indians. Snakes in general are viewed as colder and more alien than mammals, and thus immediately appear as an "other" to a Western reader. More specifically, Nag is huge, menacing, and without mercy. In Hindu stories, cobras often carry a deep connection with gods such as Vishnu or Brahma. By associating his villain with those gods, Kipling is casting unoccupied India as something dark and menacing.

He came down almost across her back, and if he had been an old mongoose he would have known that then was the time to break her back with one bite; but he was afraid of the terrible lashing return stroke of the cobra. He bit, indeed, but did not bite long enough, and he jumped clear of the whisking tail, leaving Nagaina torn and angry.

Related Characters: Nag, Nagaina, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

While Nag distracts Rikki-tikki, Nagaina strikes to attack him. Here, Kipling is exercising a simple storytelling technique with a very subtle undertone. Since Rikki-tikki hasn't faced any cobras before, he's at a disadvantage, as he is here when he fails to kill Nagaina when he has the chance. That adds uncertainty to his battle with the cobras—there's a chance he may lose, which increases the reader's rooting interest in the outcome—but it's also a subtle way of praising Rikki-tikki's bloodline. Were he just a little older, the story suggests, he would be unstoppable. The hero is thus equated with strength and might in combat, suggesting that military force is desirable for defeating threats like the cobras (and by extension, an unoccupied India).

Rikki-tikki knew he was a young mongoose, and it made him all the more pleased to think that he had managed to escape a blow from behind. It gave him confidence in himself, and when Teddy came running down the path, Rikki-tikki was ready to be petted.

Related Characters: Teddy, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Having survived his first brush with the cobras, who have gone slinking back into the bush, Rikki-tikki is ready for affection from his adoptive family. Kipling excuses pride in the mongoose, which might normally be thought of as a negative trait. Here, it's depicted as being a well-earned reward for the mongoose's bravery and sacrifice. It also reinforces that Rikki-tikki is young, and as such perhaps more prone to vanity, albeit earned. By extension, Kipling seems to be excusing an excess of pride or vanity in the occupying British since, after all, they are protecting the order and civilization which benefits India and Britain alike.

If Rikki-tikki had only known, he was doing a much more dangerous thing than fighting Nag, for Karait is so small, and can turn so quickly, that unless Rikki bit him close to the back of the head, he would get the return stroke in his eye or his lip. But Rikki did not know.

Related Characters: Teddy's Father, Teddy, Karait, Nagaina, Nag, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

After sending away Nag and Nagaina, before Rikki-tikki can return to be petted, he is confronted with another foe in the form of the baby cobra Karait. That Karait is more dangerous than his elders further paints all of the cobras as inherently evil, as even their children are innately dangerous and threatening from the beginning. This is also a bit of characterization from Kipling that helps explain Rikki-tikki's bravery. In some ways, he's so brave because he simply doesn't know how dangerous the threat is.

It also tempers the later moment when Teddy's father comes out and beats the baby cobra's corpse. Rikki-Tikki thinks Teddy's father is being foolish for wasting energy on a dead cobra—and he's right—but this earlier line suggests that Teddy's father has a right to be cautious, even though the expended energy is wasted. British rule—and its wisdom—can only be challenged so much.

●● That night at dinner, walking to and fro among the wine-glasses on the table, he might have stuffed himself three times over with nice things. But he remembered Nag and Nagaina, and though it was very pleasant to be patted and petted by Teddy's mother, and to sit on Teddy's shoulder, his eyes would get red from time to time, and he would go off into his long war cry of "Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!"

Related Characters: Teddy's Father, Teddy's Mother, Teddy, Nagaina, Nag, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Following his first skirmish with the cobras, Rikki-tikki enjoys time with his family in their home. Creature comforts are a big part of the reward Rikki-tikki enjoys for protecting the household and speak to the appeal of British colonialism within the story for the more "savage" India. But this moment makes clear that those comforts can dull Rikki-tikki's natural senses and leave him vulnerable to the threats he has not yet vanquished. His decision to "stay

lean" by not indulging in excess food and tempering his physical contact with the family suggests that rewards can only be fully enjoyed once the threat has been vanquished. The hearkens back to the balance between the natural world and the civilized world. Too much civilization makes Rikki-tikki vulnerable. He needs at least part of his wild nature in order to combat the threats to everyone (wild and civilized alike).

●● Chuchundra sat down and cried till the tears rolled off his whiskers. "I am a very poor man," he sobbed. "I never had spirit enough to run out into the middle of the room. H'sh! I mustn't tell you anything. Can't you hear, Rikki-tikki?"

Rikki-tikki listened. The house was as still as still, but he thought he could just catch the faintest scratch-scratch in the world—a noise as faint as that of a wasp walking on a window-pane—the dry scratch of a snake's scales on brick-work.

Related Characters: Chuchundra (speaker), Teddy's Father, Nag, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

While patrolling the family's house one night, Rikki-tikki comes across the immensely timid and fearful Chuchundra. Despite his cowardice, Chuchundra proves useful in this encounter by directing Rikki-tikki to identify the sound of the cobras.

This scene also sets up one of the most important differences between the "rule" of Teddy's father and the "rule" of the cobras. The cobras essentially embrace a might-makes-right philosophy, where smaller or weaker community members are prey for the strong. (This is equated with both the natural world and India.) In this world, Chuchundra could do little besides cower, and even the fear of attack reduces him to a quivering lump. Yet he still has value in the more "civilized" world ruled over by Teddy's father, and in which Rikki-tikki resides; he can show Rikki-tikki what to listen for in order to spot the cobras, providing an invaluable piece of information that contributes to the greater safety of the community. That advantage would be lost if Chuchundra didn't receive the protection and support of stronger animals like Rikki-tikki.

“It’s the mongoose again, Alice. The little chap has saved our lives now.”

Related Characters: Teddy’s Father (speaker), Nag, Rikki-tikki-tavi, Teddy’s Mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Rikki-tikki has just defeated Nag after the cobra entered the family’s home in the bathroom. Upon entering the room, Teddy’s father had seen Rikki-tikki with Nag in his mouth and shot the cobra. Now, he relates to his wife the bravery of little Rikki-tikki, who has indeed protected the entire family. This is the wisdom of Teddy’s father—in adopting the mongoose—paying off: not only has Rikki-tikki made Teddy and the garden safer, but quite literally has saved his own life and the life of his wife.

This can be read as an admonishment to the ruling British that “good” Indians represented by Rikki-tikki should be treated with respect and allowed to share in the benefits of rule—part of the surprisingly complex approach to colonialism throughout the story.

But his wife was a sensible bird, and she knew that cobra’s eggs meant young cobras later on. So she flew off from the nest, and left Darzee to keep the babies warm, and continue his song about the death of Nag. Darzee was very like a man in some ways.

Related Characters: Rikki-tikki-tavi, Nag, Nagaina, Darzee, Darzee’s Wife

Related Themes:   

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Having returned to the garden to finish taking down the cobras, Rikki-tikki first asks Darzee for help distracting Nagaina so that the mongoose can attack her eggs. Darzee demurs, however, thinking it unfair to attack any eggs—be they birds’ or snakes’. His wife, meanwhile, proves more sensible and bravely decides to help Rikki-tikki in his mission.

This is a strangely progressive passage in a story about the triumph of patriarchy. Darzee’s wife is demonstrably more

sensitive and helpful than her husband. She sees the big picture instead of just the immediate, short-term victory and acts accordingly. The dig against males is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that Darzee’s wife is not mentioned at the beginning of the story as one of Rikki-tikki’s helpers, though Darzee is. She doesn’t even get a name of her own here, yet Kipling deliberately points out how much more useful and sensible she is than her husband.

Rikki-tikki put his paws one on each side of the egg, and his eyes were blood-red. “What price for a snake’s egg? For a young cobra? For a young king cobra? For the last—the very last of the brood? The ants are eating all the others down by the melon bed.”

Related Characters: Rikki-tikki-tavi (speaker), Darzee’s Wife, Nagaina

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Rikki-tikki has begun to destroy the cobra’s eggs when Darzee’s wife informs him that Nagaina is threatening the humans at the house. Rikki-tikki rushes toward the house while carrying one egg, which he uses to deceive Nagaina into leave the humans alone. This is rather cold-blooded on Rikki-tikki’s part. He’s bargaining in bad faith and knows that he’ll have to destroy the cobra egg regardless of what Nagaina does. He’s given a pass for this duplicity, however, because he’s doing it in the name of a greater good. In contrast, the cobras’ penchant for sneaky attacks further cast them as evil. Kipling appears to be excusing such duplicity as long as it takes place in the service of the existing order. What’s more, this moment underscores the power of family in the story, as even Nagaina can be manipulated by threatening her young.

●● “Ding-dong-tock! Nag is dead—dong! Nagaina is dead! Ding-dong-tock!” That set all the birds in the garden singing, and the frogs croaking, for Nag and Nagaina used to eat frogs as well as little birds.

When Rikki got to the house, Teddy and Teddy’s mother (she looked very white still, for she had been fainting) and Teddy’s father came out and almost cried over him; and that night he ate all that was given him till he could eat no more, and went to bed on Teddy’s shoulder, where Teddy’s mother saw him when she came to look late at night.

Related Characters: Nagaina, Teddy’s Father, Teddy’s Mother, Teddy, Nag, Rikki-tikki-tavi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, all of the animals of the garden rejoice knowing that Rikki-tikki has defeated the cobras once and for all, and they are finally safe. The mention of different kinds of animals underscores that even diverse creatures were united by their hatred and fear of the snakes. More figuratively, this is the final confirmation of the benefits of colonialism: the entire community, unified and safe with the cobras now gone. Rikki-tikki indulges in human food, a comfort of the civilization represented by Teddy and his family. That the family, in turn, holds such great respect for Rikki-tikki suggests affection and respect for Indian natives, which Kipling professed in his own life. British colonialism, the story implies, is at once benefitted by valuing certain aspects of Indian culture (i.e., those that protect or at least don’t contradict British rule) and a protective force against the dangerous savageries of the more wild India; of course, later criticisms of this patronizing viewpoint would assert the ability of Indians to take care of themselves.



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.

RIKKI-TIKKI-TAVI

Rikki-tikki-tavi fought a great war in a bungalow in Segowlee. Though other animals offered advice, it was Rikki-tikki-tavi the mongoose—a small, pink-nosed creature somewhere between a cat and a weasel—who single-handedly won the war. His name comes from the sound of his “war-cry.”

As a young mongoose, Rikki-tikki-tavi is washed away from his family’s burrow and left dying by the side of the road. He’s discovered by a small English boy, Teddy, who initially thinks Rikki-tikki-tavi is dead. Teddy’s mother insists the mongoose is alive, and the human family gingerly brings him into their home and nurses him back to health.

An innately fearless creature, Rikki-tikki is given the run of the house and readily begins to exercise his curiosity. When he scrambles up Teddy’s shoulder, Teddy’s father insists Rikki-tikki is nothing to be frightened of, while his mother marvels at how their kindness must have made such a “wild” creature so friendly. Teddy’s father states that kindness will be repaid in kind and that if Teddy “doesn’t pick him up by the tail or try to put him in a cage, he’ll run in and out of the house all day long.”

Kipling starts his story off as a fable. In such stories, animals take on the traits of humans and their actions reflect certain truths about human behavior. Here, Kipling is using the mongoose to embody chivalrous traits like honor and battle-savvy, (and by implication, suggesting that his enemies are vile and unworthy).



The natural world that Rikki-tikki has just departed is harsh and merciless. Kipling’s colonialism shows through here, with a benevolent English family rescuing an Indian mongoose from death and providing him with comfort and protection. This is Rikki-tikki’s first direct taste of the benefits of British civilization. Teddy’s family doesn’t have to do this for him, but they understand the value of mercy. Their presence here asserts order over nature and shows their compassion towards those who are weak and in need of their help.



This section demonstrates a strange synergy between the natural habits of the mongoose and Kipling’s fable-notion that Rikki-tikki is a brave soldier. Rikki-tikki’s innate curiosity allows him to explore his surroundings and become comfortable with them: checking everything out to see if there’s any threats or dangers he doesn’t know about. Furthermore, when Teddy’s father cautions against abusing the animal’s trust, Kipling seems to be telling the British that they cannot abuse “good” Indians like Rikki-tikki. A partnership is implied: fair treatment and respect in exchange for joining the “benevolent” regime of enlightened British rule.



Rikki-tikki spends the rest of the day roaming the house, exploring and discovering all of the things that the family has to offer. He almost drowns himself in the bathtub, examines Teddy's father's writing desk, and sits in the man's lap while he works. He sleeps with Teddy, too, though he gets up to look into any noise in the house throughout the night. Teddy's mother and father look in on them, and Teddy's mother wonders whether the mongoose will bite the child. Teddy's father assures her he will do no such thing—and in fact will keep the boy safe if a cobra ever were to come into the nursery.

Kipling expands the notions of a benevolent British rule, since Teddy's father insists that offering protection to this helpless creature will confer benefits to the whole community (such as protection from cobras). Teddy's father, as a symbol of colonial authority, is shown to be both wise and sensible in this decision, which further reinforces the story's colonialist overtones. It also demonstrates the benefits of his wisdom: By letting the Indian mongoose "be himself," rather than trying to change him, they will reap the benefits of dealing with local (Indian) threats from someone who knows the nature of the danger and can respond more effectively than any outsider could hope to. By respecting Rikki-tikki's Indian identity, he allows everyone to benefit from the unique traits that such an identity brings.



The next day, Teddy's family shares **food** from their breakfast table with Rikki-tikki, and he takes turns sitting on their laps. The mongoose remembers that his mother once lived in the home of a white man, a general, so he knows that they will treat him well if he behaves. After breakfast, Rikki-tikki goes out into the garden, which is large and still half-wild. Overgrown bushes and thickets compete with orange trees, lime trees, and roses; wild plants intermingle with "civilized" flowers and fruit-bearing trees. He thinks it will make an excellent hunting ground.

Rikki-tikki appreciates the benefits of living in a big home: nice food that he can eat as he pleases, without having to hunt and kill it. From a colonialist perspective, it also shows that the benefits of British rule can be felt generationally. Since Rikki-tikki's mother lived in a British house, Rikki-tikki is more open to trusting the British and thus reaping the benefits they provide. That pays off when Rikki-tikki goes from the (civilized) home into the half-wild garden, where Indian "savagery" and the natural world still hold sway. This cements the earlier notion that Britain will be best served by befriending and protecting "good" Indians and allowing them their freedom, enabling them to deal with "wild" native threats in ways that the British never could.



While in the garden Rikki-tikki encounters Darzee the tailorbird and his wife, who are mourning the loss of one of their babies. It fell out of the nest and was eaten by Nag, a cobra living in their garden. Their exchange is interrupted when Nag himself appears, pulling himself up and spreading his **hood**. His eyes never change, no matter what he is thinking. Nag tells Rikki-tikki that the great god Brahm put his mark on Nag's hood, and that the little mongoose should be afraid.

If the garden is a stand-in for India itself (still "wild" in Kipling's colonialist eyes and full of dangers), then it echoes the natural world and the flood that Rikki-tikki barely survived. The cobra (a "bad" native Indian marked by a symbol of native culture) cannot be trusted to reveal his true feelings, and he demands respect through brute force. Rikki-tikki must help his helpless fellow Indians thwart these dark elements in their own culture and enjoy the benefits of Anglo-Indian civilization.



Rikki-tikki is only afraid for a moment, however, before he remembers that his mother fed him dead cobras and that he has nothing to fear from them. He challenges Nag by demanding to know why the cobra ate the tailorbirds' baby out of the nest.

Nag feigns interest in discussing, asking Rikki-tikki how eating baby birds is so different from the mongoose's diet of eggs. As he does so, his wife Nagaina positions herself to strike the mongoose from behind. Darzee gives a cry of warning and Rikki-tikki jumps his into the air just as the cobra strikes.

Rikki-tikki lands on Nagaina's back and bites her, though he does not yet know enough about fighting cobras to kill her. He lets go too early, "leaving Nagaina torn and angry." Nag threatens revenge against Darzee for warning the mongoose, and the two cobras slink back into the grass to plot further evil. Rikki-tikki remains red-eyed and alert, but the cobras don't return, and he doesn't feel confident in taking on both of the snakes at once.

Rikki-tikki sits in the dust to think. The narrator relates a myth about herbs that can cure a mongoose of a snake's bite, yet he maintains that such benefits don't exist. Instead, it's the mongoose's quick jump that allows him to avoid the cobra's bite. Rikki-tikki decides that he is quite pleased with himself for surviving an attack from behind. Teddy comes down the path and the mongoose decides that he's ready to be pet.

Facing Nag for the first time, Rikki-tikki draws on both his own direct experience and his instincts as a mongoose to confront his enemy's wrongdoing. This section demonstrates how the mongoose is becoming a part of two worlds (civilization and nature) while enjoying the benefits of both. He has seen and understands the things that civilization can bring, but he still retains his wild, natural instincts, which prevent him from being afraid of the cobra. He thus gains the best parts of both worlds, suggesting that even though nature (and India) is wild and uncontrolled, it can still provide advantages that would be lost without some measure of freedom.



Rikki-tikki is brave, but he requires the assistance of Darzee to avoid the trap set by the cobras. This demonstrates the value of civilization, and how it can be brought to an ostensibly uncivilized part of the world. In nature (and "native" India, which is assumed to be the same thing in the story), Darzee is weak and therefore useless, since he cannot defend himself against the strong. But because Rikki-tikki doesn't try to dominate or eat him, he brings the benefit of an extra pair of eyes to the mongoose's cause. By protecting everyone, the mongoose allows the "weak" Darzee to contribute to Rikki-tikki's survival, and thus the survival of everyone in the garden.



Kipling contrasts Rikki-tikki's instincts with his lack of experience. His mongoose nature gives him the psychological weapons to fight the cobras, but because he's never actually fought them before, he misses opportunities that might otherwise make his work easier. This is an example of building excitement around the narrative. Kipling has established Rikki-tikki's noble qualities, such as bravery and compassion, as well as the fact that he has numerous innate advantages simply by being a mongoose. By emphasizing his vulnerability, Kipling puts the outcome of the story in doubt.



This passage seems to suggest that Rikki-tikki possesses a certain vanity, since he is proud to have survived the sneak attack from the cobras and proved to himself that his instincts and reflexes can protect him from harm. That runs against the story's overall portrait of him as a selfless defender of the common good and appears to be a character flaw at first glance, but since Rikki-tikki carefully analyzed the reasons for his success before feeling proud, it's possible that his pride is his justified reward for a good fight whose flaws and triumphs he thoroughly understands.



As he returns to Teddy's family for a petting, Rikki-tikki spots one of the cobras' babies, Karait, wriggling in the dust near the boy. Rikki-tikki strikes—despite not knowing how much quicker the baby could be than its parents, and thus how much danger he is in—and kills the cobra hatchling before it can harm the boy. Teddy runs back into the house, claiming that the mongoose is killing a snake.

Kipling returns to the question of the mongoose's inexperience here, stating that he doesn't understand how much more dangerous Karait can be than the larger cobras. Yet unlike Rikki-tikki's first fight with Nagaina, his lack of experience actually seems to help him. He doesn't know how fast the baby cobra is, and thus doesn't stop to think about what might happen if Karait is too fast for him. He simply acts. The passage also emphasizes his courage and swift action (as well as his selfless defense of Teddy), further cementing his image as a brave and noble soldier fighting for the common good of the whole household.



Rikki-tikki refrains from eating the dead Karait, knowing that eating too much will make him slow, and instead he takes a dust bath in the bushes while Teddy's father continues to beat the hatchling's body. Rikki-tikki is perplexed by the action, since the baby snake is already dead, and he finds all the fuss amusing. Teddy's family showers Rikki-tikki with affection, but while he enjoys the attention, he refuses to take **food** from their table at dinner, even though he is welcome to it. He fears it will leave him slow for the battle to come.

Rikki-tikki demonstrates wisdom here in conserving energy: so long as the cobras remain a threat, Rikki-tikki remains vigilant about preserving his strength and speed. At the same time, Teddy's father is shown as being foolish and over-cautious because he wastes energy pounding on the baby cobra's body. From a colonialist perspective, it shows how the ruling British often waste their strength in useless displays of force and suggests that marshalling their resources more effectively can help them "tame" the "savage" native culture they currently rule.



That night, Rikki-tikki sets out on patrol of the house and meets the muskrat Chuchundra skulking in the shadows. Chuchundra lacks the courage to scurry into the center of the room, even though he wants to. He cowers before Rikki-tikki and begs for his life, even though the mongoose tells him that he is in no danger from him. Chuchundra claims that Rikki-tikki should have talked to his cousin Chua, the rat, in the garden, and points out the sound of a snake's scales rustling along the brick of the bathroom sluice.

It's telling that the mongoose is quite exasperated with Chuchundra's fearful whimpering, and yet concedes that the muskrat is right: speaking to Chua the rat would have been a good idea. This further emphasizes the notion of the common good, and how protecting everyone pays dividends that are not immediately apparent. Chuchundra is like Darzee: small and weak, without the ability to fight back against dangers. But as with Darzee, he demonstrates an ability to contribute to community safety by helping Rikki-tikki spot the cobra. By sharing that information, he contributes to the cobras' defeat, and reminds Rikki-tikki that even a fighter so marvelous as the mongoose needs the help of the whole community to earn victory.



Rikki-tikki checks Teddy's bathroom and Teddy's mother's bathroom before moving to the bathroom of Teddy's father. There, he overhears the two cobras outside plotting to murder Teddy's family. When they're gone, Nag claims, the house will be empty and Rikki-tikki will leave. Nag crawls into the water jug used to fill the bath and waits to ambush Teddy's father.

The mongoose waits—perfectly still—until Nag falls asleep. After debating the best spot to strike the snake, Rikki-tikki opts for the head above **Nag's hood** and resolves that, once he bites, he cannot let go no matter what. He strikes and braces himself against the back of the water jar to gain purchase. He holds on for dear life as the snake thrashes to and fro. He's convinced he will be killed, but he wants to be found with his teeth locked as a matter of family honor. Teddy's father, awakened by the commotion, rushes into the bathroom and blasts the snake with a gun.

Rikki-Tiki is left stunned, but essentially unhurt. As Teddy's mother enters the bathroom, white-faced with fear, the mongoose drags himself back to Teddy's bedroom and falls asleep. He awakens stiff but quite pleased with himself, having now saved Teddy's parents from an attack. He's still concerned about Nagaina and the cobras' babies, however, and he resolves to see Darzee in the garden and investigate further.

Armed with the valuable knowledge from Chuchundra, Rikki-tikki has a chance to observe the cobras unseen and perhaps strike back against them. The cobras represent a danger not just to the native animals, but to the human family, as well. Returning to the notion of colonialism, the passage suggests that if the British were to be chased out of India, the country would return to tyrannical rule through fear: just as the garden would be without Teddy's family protecting it. Rikki-tikki is thus defending more than just colonial rule: he's protecting India's supposed "advance" from savagery into civilization. This is a very controversial theme from modern eyes, since India itself has a much different view of British occupation.



Rikki-tikki demonstrates patience in waiting for the exact moment to strike, then tenacity as he hangs on for dear life. Kipling suggests that these are indicative of a noble spirit, with the intelligence to strategize and the boldness to follow through on his actions. More importantly, it defines honor as more important to the mongoose than even his life. He's accepted the reality that he might die, but if he is killed, he wants his jaws to be found locked in place: presumably so that Teddy's family will know that he died in their defense. The mongoose specifically maintains that he wants to be found with his teeth locked "for the honor of his family." Interestingly enough, however, Kipling never stipulates whether that family is his mongoose parents or his adopted human parents; it may even be that he no longer differentiates between the two.



Again, pride in one's accomplishments is shown as a valid reward for a well-fought battle. Rikki-tikki is allowed to indulge in needed activities like sleep, but also to feel confident and pleased. So again, Kipling allows his hero some justification in feelings that might otherwise be considered vain. He further justifies this pride by demonstrating how it hasn't blunted Rikki-tikki's resolve. Nagaina is still out there and while the mongoose is pleased with himself, he hasn't let his pride deter him from the battles still to be fought. His pride helps his confidence, which he may need, but the mongoose doesn't allow it to go beyond that.



Rikki-tikki finds Darzee singing a song of triumph at Nag's death. The mongoose is supremely irritated at the tailorbird's joy, since Nagaina and the cobra eggs are still at large. He asks Darzee where the eggs are, and Darzee tells him. The mongoose asks Darzee to distract Nagaina by pretending that his wing is broken and luring her away, but Darzee has a difficult time understanding the difference between the cobras' eggs and birds' eggs and feels it's unfair to kill either.

Darzee's wife, however, understands that Rikki-tikki is acting for the good of the whole garden—because cobra eggs will turn into more cobras—and feigns a broken wing to draw Nagaina away. She succeeds in her task, claiming that Teddy broke her wing with a stone. Nagaina promises the bird that she will kill Teddy before she is done and tries to get Darzee's wife to look into her eyes, which will hypnotize her. Darzee's wife is too smart for that, however, and continues to draw the cobra away.

Distracted by the bird, Nagaina misses Rikki-tikki sneaking into her nest. The eggs are ready to hatch, and the mongoose wastes no time in biting off the tops of the eggs and smashing the unborn cobras within. He's down to three eggs when he is interrupted by Darzee's wife, shrieking that Nagaina has gone into the house and "means killing."

Rikki-tikki smashes two of the remaining eggs and takes the third back to the home to find Nagaina menacing the human family at their breakfast table. Teddy's mother and father are white-faced and stone still as the cobra advances on them, close enough to Teddy to bite.

Though Darzee was helpful earlier in the conflict, his inability to see the bigger picture makes him a hindrance here. It contrasts with Rikki-tikki's practicality and level-headedness: understanding that the celebration is premature and perhaps even blunting his sense of coming danger. Darzee's foolishness is compounded by his inability to differentiate between his eggs and the cobras'. From a colonialist perspective, it serves as a quiet criticism of "good" Indians who want to bargain or excuse the actions of "bad" Indians. It doesn't make him a traitor or a villain, but it does make him a liability, and the story is clear to chide him for such perceived foolishness.



This is another example of the more helpless animals lending aid to Rikki-tikki, making them worthy of saving (as in a civilized society) instead of being abandoned to the strong because they are weak (as in nature). The common good is worth protecting, and that sometimes means taking risks. Darzee's wife understands that in ways her husband doesn't, and so she is able to help in ways he can't. Kipling draws a direct comparison between Darzee's foolishness and the foolishness of human men (as opposed to women, who are far wiser and more sensible), ensuring that readers don't miss the point.



This passage demonstrates Kipling's comparatively flexible morality, and how seemingly negative qualities in his hero are justified for the greater good. Rikki-tikki is destroying unborn eggs, which differs little on the surface from Nag eating the tailorbird's baby. But while Nag's actions are purely selfish, Rikki-tikki is acting for the protection of everyone. What could be a case of moral double standards is thus justified because of the ultimate aims of each, making the mongoose's cunning, deception, and destruction of the eggs chivalrous qualities used for the greater good of all.



Rikki-tikki saves the final egg because he understands its value as a bargaining chip. However, he also can't let any of the cobras live, and Nagaina has a powerful piece of leverage herself in her ability to kill Teddy or his family with one bite. This forces Rikki-tikki into a difficult tactical calculation about how best to win.



The mongoose challenges Nagaina to a fight, but the cobra will not be distracted from the family. Rikki-tikki tells her that he has smashed her nest of eggs and that only one remains. She turns, focusing solely on her last remaining egg, while Teddy's father drags him to safety before going for his gun. Rikki-tikki boasts that he has tricked Nagaina, and taunts her with details about Nag's death

Rikki-tikki has been portrayed as a sound tactician and military strategist, in keeping with his "soldier's" identity. He's thus able to game out the cobra's possible actions and play off of them to get her to do what he needs her to do instead of inflicting harm on anyone else. In addition, Rikki-tikki has morality on his side: the mongoose has consistently worked for the good of everyone instead of his own personal gain. That means he has an ally to turn to in the form of Teddy's father, whereas Nagaina's self-interest leaves her alone.



The egg sits between Rikki-tikki's paws as he engages with Nagaina. She strikes again and again, but he ducks aside every time. He forgets about the egg, however, and Nagaina manages to grab it and make a run for **the hole in the earth** where she and Nag used to live. The mongoose follows her down into the hole—something no sensible mongoose should do—because he knows that if Nagaina survives, the trouble will only start again.

With the stand-off broken and Teddy's father going for his gun, Nagaina has only one option: make a run for it. Kipling is careful to demonstrate that even this carries dangers, since if Nagaina escapes, she will return. The threat helps emphasize Rikki-tikki's military prowess along with his courage. He takes a risk by following her into the hole, but he understands that he should face a daunting battle rather than backing down.



Darzee begins to sing a mourning song of Rikki-tikki's demise. As he does so, however, Rikki-tikki emerges victorious from the **cobra's hole**, claiming to have slain Nagaina at last. The ants in the garden hear him and move into the hole to see if it is true.

Kipling heightens the drama by letting the reader contemplate a terrible fate for Rikki-tikki. By not showing what happens in the hole, Kipling emphasizes how alone Rikki-tikki is in this final battle: none of his allies are there, and his opponent is cornered with nowhere else to go, making her especially dangerous.



Rikki-tikki falls asleep on the spot, and when he awakens, he tells Darzee to inform the coppersmith that the snakes are dead. All the little animals in the garden sing the mongoose's praises and express joy at the cobras' deaths. He then goes into the big house and eats his fill from the humans' **dinner** table before riding to bed on Teddy's shoulders. He is proud of his victory, but not too proud, since he can't let his vigilance waver. Thus did he keep the garden safe from cobras until no snake dared to show its face.

With the danger finally over, the triumphant hero gets to enjoy his well-earned rewards. In fact, the whole garden celebrates the benefits he brings: civilization integrating with the wild for the good of all. And yet even here, Kipling emphasizes that these benefits must be constantly defended. Rikki-tikki can't grow complacent, lest he lose the abilities that allowed him to triumph in the first place and some new threat arises to menace everything he fought to achieve.





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