



Kim

Rudyard Kipling
(1901)

PLOT

This novel is the story of Kimball (Kim) O'Hara, the **thirteen-year-old orphan son of an Irish sergeant**, who died during service in India. Kim wears an amulet around his neck containing his father's papers and his own birth certificate. Before his death, his father told him that these papers would one day make his fortune by identifying Kim to his father's old regiment. The emblem of this regiment, a red bull on a green field, means protection for the son of the former soldier.

After spending some time as a **vagabond in the city of Lahore**, Kim attaches himself to an **old Tibetan lama** (a Buddhist monk) from the North. They decide to go on their wanderings together to **reach the mystical River of the Arrow**, which represents the Nirvana – the release from the 'wheel of life'.

His father's old regiment eventually traces him and, after being adopted, Kim is sent to school but is able to continue his wanderings during the school holidays. While still a young boy, **he is taken on by the British secret service and works under the guidance of an Indian agent**. His British nationality and his knowledge of India enable him to capture the documents of a couple of **Russian spies in the Himalayas**. The two foreign agents bump into Kim and the lama on the road while the lama is showing Kim his illustration of the Great Wheel of Existence. The Russian spy likes it and tries to get it from the lama. When he refuses to sell this piece of religious art, the man hits him in the face. The local people see this foreigner hitting a holy man and they immediately attack the two Russian agents who escape leaving behind their baggage.

Kim searches it and finds a locked box full of letters and messages from the hill kings that speak of treason against the British Indian government. The lama and Kim travel south to the house of the Kulu woman. By the time they arrive, the lama is sick in the soul and Kim is physically exhausted. He sleeps for thirty-six hours with his super-secret stolen papers under his bed. **While he is sleeping, the lama has a vision**. After two days of fasting, he sees himself flying high above the world and reaching the edge of the Great Soul at the centre of creation. But just as he is going to receive Enlightenment, a voice asks him what would happen to Kim if he died. So **the lama decides to go back to his body to bring wisdom back to his beloved disciple**.

SETTING

The novel is set in the **late 19th century** and covers a **wide territory**, from the Himalayas in the North down to Benares (now Varanasi) and Lucknow in the South to convey the idea of how enormous **British India** truly was. The description of India is both realistic, with its religious and ethnic tensions during Britain's imperial domination,

and fairytale-like, since Kipling turns India into a colourful positive background for Kim's adventures.

THE CHARACTER OF KIM

Kim manages to adapt to the unique situations in which he finds himself. He is trying to find his place in the country in which he was born, while at the same time struggling to create an identity of his own. Kim is a **white man by birth** but he has grown up as an orphan on the streets of Lahore, looked after by a half-cast woman, probably a prostitute. **He looks like and lives like a low-caste Hindu street-urchin**, he cannot read, write or speak English very well. This makes him **neither wholly British nor wholly Indian**, and his being a unique 'mixture o' things' is a constant in his quest for his identity.

THEMES

The novel deals with the Buddhist theme of the **equality and unity of men**. This ideal overcomes the caste or class distinctions of the predominantly Hindu society Kim has grown into.

The lama carries with him a diagram called the Wheel of Life. It is a symbolic representation of the **Buddhist doctrine** that all lives are equally bound in the cycle of life and that all souls seek release from this cycle by attaining Enlightenment.

The **theme of race** is also very important because Kipling's India included a mixture of people from different nationalities, ethnic groups and religions. Race still accounts for the different economic and social mobility the various characters have. Kipling is writing from a **pro-imperial, racist point of view**. Although Kim is very poor, he has the possibility of having a profession partly because he is white. However, Kipling also criticises white racism and portrays all of his characters with depth and compassion. He also emphasises their religious background. This novel includes Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist characters even though Kim has a secular, non-religious approach to the world. The novel focuses on what spirituality can do for the moral growth of its characters. The lama is a good and honest man thanks in part to his religious commitment, and a lot of the charity and generosity that Kim and the lama find on the road arises from the respect the people of India have for the lama's holy status.

STYLE

The narrator is **third-person** and each chapter opens with an epigraph, an excerpt of verse, many of which are taken from Kipling's own works. Most of the story of Kim unfolds through **dialogue** and the style is really dynamic, shifting back and forth between character conversation and narration, and between serious and humorous tones.

**Key idea****The double quest**

Kim is about adventure, from the exotic setting to the spy subject matter to the strange characters. However, it describes not just one but two characters looking for something. The lama wants to find his River of the Arrow – which symbolises ultimate wisdom for him – and Kim wants to find a job with the British Indian Secret Service.

Since the novel is built around these two characters, it can be considered as a quest story. Moreover, at the beginning of the novel Kim is a young teenager without any particular rule or direction in life and at the end of the novel he is sure of what he wants. Therefore, *Kim* is also a coming-of-age novel.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.**

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Who is Kim? | 5 In what sense is Kim a 'unique mixture of things'? |
| 2 Who does he travel through India with? | 6 What are the main themes of the novel? |
| 3 What are they trying to reach? | 7 How is the novel written? |
| 4 How does Kipling present India? | 8 What kind of novel is <i>Kim</i> ? |

T69**Kim at an Indian railway station**

In the text that follows Kim and the old lama are about to start their pilgrimage to Benares, where the sacred river flows; they are at a railway station and the boy is reassuring the old man about a train ride.

They entered the fort-like railway station, black in the end of night; the electric sizzling¹ over the goods-yard where they **handle** the heavy Northern grain traffic.

'This is the work of devils!' said the lama², recoiling³ from the **hollow** echoing darkness, the glimmer of rails⁴ between the masonry⁵ platforms, and the maze of girders⁶ above. He stood in a gigantic stone hall paved, it seemed, with the sheeted dead⁷ – third-class passengers who had taken their tickets overnight and were sleeping in the waiting-rooms. All hours of the twenty-four are alike to Orientals, and their passenger traffic is regulated **accordingly**.

'This is where the fire-carriages come. One stands behind that hole' – Kim pointed to the ticket-office – 'who will give thee a paper to take thee to Umballa⁸'.

'But we go to Benares⁹', he replied **petulantly**.

'All one. Benares then. Quick: she comes!'

'Take thou the purse.'

The lama, not so well used to trains as he had pretended, **started** as the 3.25 a.m. south **bound** roared in. The sleepers sprung to life, and the station filled with clamour and shoutings, cries of water and **sweetmeat** vendors, shouts of native policemen, and **shrill** yells¹⁰ of women gathering up their baskets, their families, and their husbands.

'It is the train – only the te-rain¹¹. It will not come here. Wait!' Amazed at the lama's immense simplicity (he had handed him a small bag full of rupees¹²), Kim asked and paid for a ticket to Umballa. A sleepy clerk grunted¹³ and **flung** out a ticket to the next station, just six miles distant.

'Nay,' said Kim, scanning it¹⁴ with a **grin**. 'This may serve for farmers, but I live in the city of Lahore. It was cleverly done, babu¹⁵. Now give the ticket to Umballa.'

The babu scowled and dealt¹⁶ the proper ticket.

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Chapter 2

- 1 **the electric sizzling**. Le apparecchiature elettriche che ronzavano.
- 2 **lama**. Dal tibetano: monaco buddista del Tibet o della Mongolia.
- 3 **recoiling**. Indietreggiando.
- 4 **the glimmer of rails**. Il bagliore delle rotaie.
- 5 **masonry**. In muratura.
- 6 **maze of girders**. Groviglio (*lett.*: labirinto) delle travi.
- 7 **sheeted dead**. Morti avvolti in lenzuoli.
- 8 **Umballa**. Ambala, città indiana.
- 9 **Benares**. Città indiana oggi nota come Varanasi.
- 10 **yells**. Grida.
- 11 **te-rain**. *Train*: Kim sillaba la parola perché il lama possa capire meglio.
- 12 **rupees**. Rupie (monete indiane).
- 13 **grunted**. Borbottò, brontolò.
- 14 **scanning it**. Esaminandolo.
- 15 **babu**. Signore (in hindi).
- 16 **scowled and dealt**. Aggrottò le sopracciglia e gli diede.



25 'Now another to Amritzar,' said Kim, who had no notion of spending Mahbub Ali's money¹⁷ on anything so crude¹⁸ as a paid ride to Umballa. 'The price is so much. The small money in return is just so much. I know the ways of the te-rain... Never did yogi¹⁹ need chela²⁰ as thou dost²¹,' he went on merrily to the bewildered²² lama. 'They would have flung thee out at Mian Mir but for me. This way! Come.' He returned the
30 money, keeping only one anna²³ in each rupee of the price of the Umballa ticket as his commission – the immemorial commission of Asia.

The lama jibbed²⁴ at the open door of a crowded third-class carriage. 'Were it not better to walk?' said he weakly.

- 17 Mahbub Ali's money. Il denaro di Mahbub Ali, agente segreto del governo britannico.
18 crude. Rozzo.
19 yogi. Asceta indù.
20 chela. Discepolo.
21 thou dost. Arc.: *you do*.
22 bewildered. Confuso, sconcertato.
23 anna. Moneta indiana (sedici anna formavano una rupia).
24 jibbed. Esitò, mostrò riluttanza.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 impatiently | 6 consequently |
| 2 jumped from surprise | 7 directed |
| 3 manage | 8 empty |
| 4 sharp | 9 broad smile |
| 5 candy | 10 threw |

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and note down

- where the story is set;
- who the characters involved are;
- what happens in the railway station when the train arrives;
- what Kim wants to buy;
- why he has to negotiate the train ticket;
- the lama's reaction at his entering a crowded third-class carriage.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 CONSIDER the narrative technique employed.

- 1 Identify the kind of narrator. Tick as appropriate.
 - Obtrusive.
 - Unobtrusive.
- 2 From whose point of view are all the events seen?
- 3 Define the effect of this narrative technique on the reader. Tick as appropriate.
 - It restricts his view to the narrator's.
 - It involves him directly arousing his sympathy for Kim.
 - It leaves the reader more free to judge the events of the story.

4 EXPLAIN how the text presents three faces of Anglo-India: the native lama, the ticket clerk and Kim.

- 1 How would you describe the characters?
- 2 Which social groups do they represent?

5 FIND examples of words belonging to the Indian world. What is the author's aim in using such expressions?



6 COMPLETE the table below defining Kim's tone and aim when he speaks to the lama and when he turns to the ticket clerk.

	Tone	Aim
Lama		
Ticket clerk		

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

7 DISCUSS. What British mood does this extract exemplify? What was Kipling's position regarding colonialism?