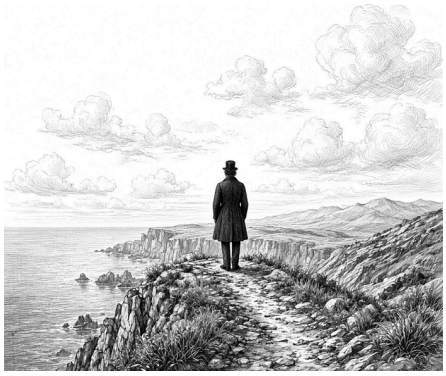
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



If—

by Rudyard Kipling

Grades 7–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Kipling wrote "If—" around 1895 and published it in 1910, in Rewards and Fairies, with a story about Leander Starr Jameson. The whole poem is one long sentence: a chain of "If you can" conditions that only resolves in the last two lines. It is written in iambic pentameter with alternating rhymes.

THE POEM

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone.
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

VOCABULARY

impostors — people who pretend to be someone they are not

knaves — dishonest men; scoundrels

pitch-and-toss — a gambling game of throwing coins

sinew — tendon; physical strength

virtue — moral goodness

the common touch — the ability to relate to ordinary people

unforgiving — not allowing mistakes or second chances

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the poem repeat “If you can” so many times before reaching its main point?

2. Why does Kipling call Triumph and Disaster “those two impostors”?

3. Find two places where the poem asks for balance between two extremes. What are they?

4. What does the speaker mean by “fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run”?

5. Who is the speaker addressing, and what is the reward promised at the end? Is the advice still useful today?

WRITING PROMPT

Write your own “If” poem of 8–16 lines giving advice to a younger person. Start most lines with “If you can” and end with the reward.

If— — Answer Key

1. The repetition builds suspense and piles up tests; the reader must wait for the payoff, just as character takes time to build. The sentence resolves only at "Yours is the Earth".
2. Both success and failure are temporary and misleading; neither shows who you really are, so you should "treat those two impostors just the same".
3. Examples: "trust yourself when all men doubt you, / But make allowance for their doubting too"; "dream—and not make dreams your master"; "walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch"; "all men count with you, but none too much".
4. Use every moment fully; make each minute count with effort.
5. "my son" — a father to his son. The reward: "Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it" and "you'll be a Man". Accept supported opinions.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/if-rudyard-kipling/