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Back to the Beginning: Rudyard Kipling's Story of How Beings Learned to Write

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Abstract

Focuses on ways that Kipling used his abilities as writer, artist, and father to tell the story of how writing began, touching on linguistic and childhood development theories.

Additional Keywords

Language development; Writing; Children's literature; Kipling, Rudyard. Just So Stories



NOTES AND LETTERS

BACK TO THE BEGINNING: RUDYARD KIPLING'S STORY OF THE INVENTION OF WRITING

MARIE NELSON

I WILL BEGIN BY GIVING BRIEF ATTENTION TO “awesome,” a word that in my curmudgeonly opinion is now being vastly overused in praise of recent technological developments. I thought at first that it was just a compound twenty-first century adolescents were fond of, but recently, having re-opened Dwight Bolinger’s *Aspects of Language* (1968), a textbook stored on my linguistics shelf, I found an assertion by a recognized scholar that “the number of different languages is formidable and is quite *awesome* [emphasis mine] if we include the tongues once spoken but now dead” (11-12). So the word is hardly new, and, though it may currently be used to give more credit to our present ability to “instantly communicate” than it deserves, it may be appropriate for reference to discoveries made by human beings who lived in a much earlier time than our own. To illustrate this I will turn to Rudyard Kipling’s fictional representation of those discoveries in two of his illustrated *Just So Stories for Little Children*, “How the First Letter Was Written” and “How the Alphabet Was Made,” that were set in the Neolithic period of human pre-history.

“Neolithic,” a *New Columbia Encyclopedia* entry explains, “is used, especially in archaeology and anthropology, to designate a stage of cultural evolution or technical development characterized by the use of stone tools” (1907). Continuing to read we learn that “the existence of settled villages [was] largely dependent on domesticated plants and animals, and the presence of such crafts as pottery and weaving.” This was the time and place that Kipling chose as a setting for his story of “How the First Letter was Written,” which begins with an account of an attempt by a precocious daughter to send a request for a replacement for her father’s broken spear. He *really* needs “a big black” spear that is back home in his Neolithic Cave, and Taffy hopes she can use a shark’s tooth borrowed from a “Stranger-man” — it will become a writing tool — to send a request that the spear be sent to him.

The *New Columbia Encyclopedia* explanation concludes with a statement that the termination of the Neolithic period was marked by such innovations as the rise of urban civilization and the introduction of metal tools and *writing* (emphasis mine); and “How the Alphabet was Made,” like the story that directly precedes it in Kipling’s *Just So Stories*, includes an abundance of pictorial representations which provide the reader-viewer an opportunity to *see* a progression from pictographic to alphabetic representation.

But on to the tool-related problem with which the story begins. A father, Tegumai Bopsulai, and his daughter, a girl named Taffimai Metallumai and called Taffy, are fishing for carp. The father’s spear breaks, and he has no spare. Two possible solutions present themselves: the father can mend the spear, or the daughter can go home to get another one. The father rejects the second solution because the journey is too long and dangerous for his daughter to undertake alone, and sits down to try to mend his spear, a task that presents apparently insurmountable difficulties. This, the precocious daughter recognizes—and Arnold Knoepfmacher notes the importance of the role Kipling’s own daughter Josephine played in the creation of the *Just So* stories in “Kipling’s ‘Just-So’ Partner: The Dead Child as Collaborator and Muse”—is a situation that calls for transcendence of time and space. Taffy and her father must write a message that can be carried home to Teshumai Tewindrow, the mother of the family, who, upon receiving it, will send a replacement spear to them.

And now a potential messenger, a man from another tribe who does not understand their language, appears. The stranger interprets—or misinterprets—the gestures of father and daughter. He takes the father’s ignoring him (Tegumai is very busy trying to mend his spear) to be a sign of his great superiority, and the daughter’s nonverbal accompaniment to her spoken words (her gestures are very emphatic) as the imperious behavior of the daughter of a very important man. To establish a friendly relationship with these important people, the stranger rips a piece of birch-bark from a tree, intending “to show that his heart [is] as white as the birch-bark and he mean[s] no harm” (127).

The object, friendly as it is, does not communicate his intended message. Instead, the daughter takes his act as an invitation to inscribe a message to her mother. She uses the birch-bark as a writing surface, and borrowing “a magic shark’s tooth” from the stranger’s necklace, invites him to watch her draw a message. As she draws, she says

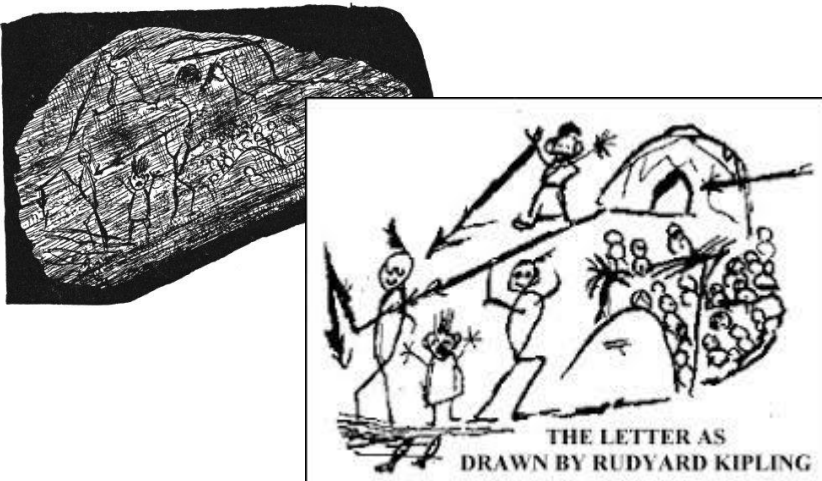
Now I’ll draw you some beautiful pictures! You can look over my shoulder, but you mustn’t joggle. First I’ll draw Daddy fishing. It isn’t very like him; but Mummy will know, because I’ve drawn his spear all

broken. Well, now I'll draw the other spear that he wants, the black-handled spear. It looks as if it was sticking in Daddy's head but that's because the shark's tooth slipped and this piece of bark isn't big enough. That's the spear I want you to fetch; so I'll draw a picture of me myself 'splaining to you. My hair doesn't stand up like I've drawn, but it's easier to draw that way. Now I'll draw you. *I think you're very nice really, but I can't make you pretty in the picture, so you mustn't be 'fended. Are you 'fended?* (128-29)

If the stranger knew her language he would be able to understand Taffy's running commentary and the visual message as well. As it is, since he is unable to understand her spoken words, he interprets what she has drawn to mean that "There must be a big battle going to be fought somewhere, and this extraordinary child, who takes my magic shark's tooth but who does not swell up or burst, is telling me to call all the great Chief's tribe to help him" (129).

Taffy continues to explain as she draws and provides her messenger with a map. He must travel until he comes to two trees, go over a hill, pass a beaver swamp (she draws in the beaver heads, which, she admits, do not look much like beaver heads), and find her mother, whom she pictures with hands upheld in pleasant greeting outside their cave. She also draws the needed spear (which she says is actually inside) *outside* the cave (131).

The helpful stranger takes the message (reproduced here, I must acknowledge—I know I could not do this without them—with the help of an Epson scanner, a Brother printer, a Microsoft computer, and a Google image search to clarify the details: gifts from the technology of the age in which we twenty-first century readers and writers live) to Taffy's mother.



As Taffy's mother "reads"—she really misreads—the message it says:

[This Stranger-man] has stuck my Tegumai all full of spears, and frightened poor Taffy so that her hair stands all on end; and not content with that, he brings me a horrid picture of how it was done. Look! [...] Here is my Tegumai with his arm broken; here is a spear sticking into his back; here is a man with a spear ready to throw; here is another man throwing a spear from a Cave, and here are a whole pack of people [...].
(133)

Taffy's pictorial message is obviously fraught with ambiguity. Her mother takes it to mean that the message bearer—whose intention has been to *help*—has attacked Tegumai, "stuck him all full of spears," frightened Taffy so that her hair stands on end—and brought her a *picture* of how it all was done. She shows the message to her "Neolithic lady friends," who show their support by *sitting* on the "Stranger Man" while Tegumai pulls his hair and fills it with mud. And thus the messenger is punished, not because he did not genuinely intend to perform an act of kindness, but because the mode of communication—Taffy's pictorial representation—has failed to carry her intended message.

The mode of communication Taffy's mother and her friends choose to send *their* message, a call for help, does not fail. A host of tribesmen hear the "Reverberating Tribal Drums" (133) and they respond immediately. Kipling describes the men as standing "in hierarchical order," and, exulting in his personal hoard of English words, he draws vocabulary items from a time earlier than his own Victorian period to speak of "feudal and prognathous Villeins" and "adscript serfs, holding the reversion of a scraped marrow-bone." With a happy question, "Aren't these beautiful words?" he even refers to "heriot," a word presumably acquired from fairly close study of the literature of his heroic, but long dead, Anglo-Saxon ancestors (135). (The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the definition "trappings, equipments, ornaments, armour" for the Old English root word of *heriot*, *heregeatwa*.) And next, drawing on a different aspect of his experience (he has observed that children follow their own rules for forming the past tense of verbs and for noun-verb agreement), Kipling has his very believable Taffy explain what she has just done:

I wanted the Stranger-man to fetch Daddy's spear, so I drawded it. [...] There wasn't lots of spears. There was only one spear. I drawded it three times to make sure. I couldn't help it looking as if it stuck into Daddy's head—there wasn't room on the birch-bark; and those things that Mummy called bad people are my beavers. I drawded them to show him the way through the swamp; and I drawded Mummy at the mouth of the Cave looking pleased because he is a nice Stranger-man. (137)

Taffy's misunderstood message causes considerable trouble, and it evokes serious criticism of the child addressed by the Tribe of Tegumai as "Small-person-with-no-manners-who-ought-to-be-spanked" (137). But when she has explained it the Chief of the tribe gives her credit for a great invention that will be someday be called writing.

Kipling's chief oversimplifies in at least one important way. Pictorial representation does not necessarily lead to what we conventionally call "writing," that is, to the use of visual symbols to represent the sounds of a language. Taffy and her father have not yet mastered the process Ignatz Gelb called "phonetization" in *A Study of Writing* (78-79). They have, however, reached a "semasiographic stage" of development. They can communicate by means of visible marks, or at least they could if Taffy drew pictures that her mother could more accurately interpret. And they have approached the "phonographic" stage, in which individual marks (or "graphs") signify and correspond to the sounds of the spoken language—and are about to create an alphabet.

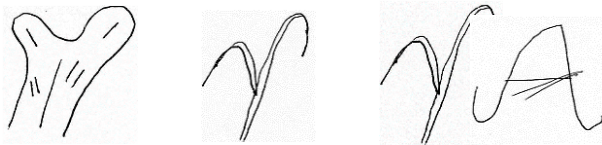
What they are on the verge of accomplishing is not of course without precedent, but my purpose here is to show how one good story leads to another. "How the First Letter Was Written" lays the groundwork for "How the Alphabet Was Made." Kipling's "First Letter" story develops a context that consists of a series of interactions—the father and daughter's verbal problem-solving attempts, the stranger's failed attempt to communicate through the gift of an object, the ambiguous message Taffy sends home to her mother, and her mother's successful use of rhythmic drum-beats. In doing so, it shows that the relationship between pictorial representation and audible expression can be very loose. Taffy knew what she meant to say well enough to say it in two different ways: she drew it, and she explained it to her own satisfaction as she drew it. The two types of representation were sufficiently independent, however, that her mother, who, unlike the stranger, could have understood her spoken words if she had heard them, could not understand what her pictures meant *without* hearing her spoken words.

Objects alone, as the stranger's gift of birch-bark shows, cannot carry messages unless both sender and receiver already know their significance. Objects carrying visible marks, again, though they may carry agreed upon meanings, do not necessarily function as written messages in the sense in which "written" is now conventionally understood. Those marks, if the message is to be communicated as a written message must be recognizable as sounds. For this to be possible, one more step must be taken—and Tegumai and Taffy take that step in "How the Alphabet Was Made."

“How the Alphabet Was Made” begins with problems that arise from the misinterpretation of Taffy’s picture, but it is not yet, in any real sense, a problem-solving story. Taffy and her father are simply whiling away the time waiting for the carp to bite. Tegumai is inscribing marks on a piece of birch-bark, and Taffy asks him to make a sound. When he says “ah,” she notes that his mouth looks just like a wide-open carp’s mouth, and conceives a plan to draw a carp’s mouth that will be a “reminder” of the “ah-noise” (147). Taking a first step toward abstraction, Taffy draws just part of the carp, his mouth, pretending that the rest of him is drawn and asserting (this is the birth of phonetization) that the mouth picture means “ah.” Her carp looks like the picture on the left below, until her father adds the feeler that distinguishes the carp from perches and trouts (Taffy’s plurals), which makes it look like the drawing in the center. Taffy’s next step, a further simplification, produces a sign for “ah” that, unless you are following the story, is no longer recognizable as a carp’s mouth. It looks like the picture on the right below.



Her father’s response to Taffy’s second request that he make a sound that she can draw, is “Yah.” His “Yah” requires the “invention” of a second sound symbol. Again, the carp provides the form, this time with his tail, which begins as the drawing on the left, and is reduced to the symbol next to it, which makes it possible to write the one-syllable word “YA,” which carries the meaning “water.” Then the “Y” symbol is then used with a round “O” to form the word “YO,” which means “Bad Water,” and the creators of writing realize that they have found a way to post a warning.



And then, with Taffy and Tegumai’s representation of the “ssh” sound, onomatopoeia comes into being. Snakes can signal their presence by making a “ssh” sound, and a picture of a snake making this sound takes on alphabetic status.



But Kipling's story of the beginning of writing—and he takes it all the way to WXYZ—does not confine itself to what could perhaps be explained by reference to the “bow-wow” theory, which attributes the birth of language to the human ability to imitate sounds made by animals or natural forces like thunder and the wind. And, despite the fact that the ever-talkative Taffy easily relates the “sssh” sound of the snake to a request to be quiet, it does not give credulity to the “pooh-pooh” theory, which holds that language developed from certain repeated, pre-linguistic sound gestures. But *these* are theories that have been put forth as attempts to explain the origin of *language*. Taffy and Tegumai are not inventing language. They are working out a way to represent the sounds of language through the use of visible forms.

As the story continues, Tegumai almost immediately exploits the new system's potential economy when he combines the Y, which he detaches from its carp's tail associations, with an O, which is just as easily separated from its “round mouth,” “egg,” or “stone” affiliations. And here it should perhaps be stressed that Tegumai does not make the decisions about how letters should be formed on his own. The process, as Kipling tells the story, like his decision to use the title *Just So Stories for Little Children* for the collection in which the two stories discussed here appear, had to take into account the daughter's opinions.

Bedtime stories, as Knoepflmacher wrote in “Kipling's “Just-So” Partner,” had to be re-told exactly as Kipling's daughter Josephine remembered hearing them, and he added that Josephine Kipling played an important role in the *creation* of the *Just-So stories*. Here we can almost *see* her play a creator role when Tegumai obediently opens his mouth wide and Taffy *demand*s that he say “ah” with his mouth wide open. At this point I am beginning to hear an echo from rather far back in my mind of the fourth verse of the Old English rune poem—one of a series of Old English poems texts included in T.A. Shippey's in *Poems of Wisdom and Literature*, a book to which I often find myself returning. It begins with the words “‘Os' byð ordfruma ælcra spræce,” or, as Shippey translates, “the mouth is the originator of every speech” (81).

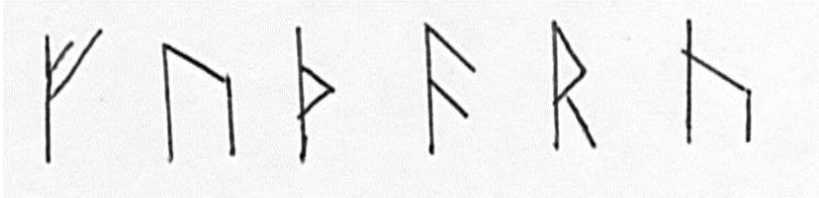
But back to Kipling's story, which continues with Tegumai's invention of words for “rain” and “Ma-ma,” and for the sounds “z,” “e,” “n,” “Ga,” and “Wa,” and to “YO,” a combination of shapes that carries the meaning “bad water.” Tegumai and Taffy are creating an alphabet—a sequence of symbols that represent individual sounds that can be combined to make syllables and words. And though we may have come to take writing for granted, this can be seen as a reason to acknowledge that a wonderful thing happened when human beings learned to use visible symbols for audible sounds.

The series of developments from pictographic representation to alphabetic status to which Kipling gave visible form in his *Just So* stories is not without precedent in the real-life development of written language. As Nigel

Pennick asserted in his discussion of the Old English runic alphabet, “[e]ven in their most developed form, many of the runes have a pictographic nature” (*Magical Alphabets* 78).

The examples that follow below are taken from Pennick’s representation of letters selected from an Old English alphabet poem that can be found, with translation, in Shippey’s *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (80-85), but here I will focus on Pennick’s presentations of the relationships between the forms of individual letters and their meanings.

The letters below spell out the word *Futhark*, which, as Pennick explains, is the name that has been given to an Old English alphabet poem. But



the relevant point here is the relationship of visible representations of audible sounds to our perceptions of the forms themselves. The visible form of the first letter of the word “is said to resemble the horns of a cow,” Pennick writes. Then *Ur*, the second letter—and this may be a bit easier to see—“is shaped like the strong bodily form of the wild ox,” while *Thorn* is clearly shaped like a thorn (78). *Kennaz* or *Cen*, the fourth letter, he continues, is related to the ash tree and to Yggdrasil, the world tree on which the Norse god Thor hung without food or water for nine days and nine nights when he discovered the alphabet; while the fifth, which looks like our Modern English “r,” stands for the word “riding” and carries a meaning of sexual activity as well as the action we associate with horsemanship. And the sixth and final letter carries the meaning “torch,” which signified the “chip of pine wood which was burnt to illuminate houses in former times” (92-3) and, because it could provide a surface for the inscription of representations of sounds, provided a transformative path to understanding.

The Old English “Rune” poem presents other correspondences between visible objects and symbols used to represent those objects, but my intention here has not been to try to resurrect a “dead language” but to give credit to our predecessors for providing us with a basic means to communicate, so I will conclude with a quotation from Ronald W. Langacker’s *Language and Structure: Some Fundamental Linguistic Concepts*. Writing, like Bolinger, in the 1960’s, Langacker first asserted the primary value of language itself. Then, having acknowledged that “Writing is no more than a secondary, graphic representation,” he gave attention to *its* special values. “A written message is relatively permanent, whereas speech is quite ephemeral,” he continued, adding

that “Facts and ideas committed to writing can be preserved without being a burden on memory,” which led to an assertion that “The debt of modern society to writing is enormous. Writing is not just a convenience; our highly integrated, technologically oriented civilization could hardly exist in anything like its present form without the ability to record and preserve linguistic messages” (58).

We have, of course, come a long way since the Old English “Rune Poem” was committed to parchment and Kipling’s *Just So Stories* were published in 1902, but the stories I have considered here, told by a master story teller and illustrator, may help us place the current “awesome” developments of technology in perspective. As Linda Shires wrote in “Mutual Adaptation in Rudyard Kipling’s Letters to His Children and *Just So Stories*,” “Kipling’s ability to see, create, and share a child’s joy in letters and stories is perhaps more significant than it may [at first] seem”; and, giving attention to Kipling’s respect for his listener and collaborator, “Honoring the child mind enabled Kipling to imagine how, through collaboration with others close to but different from himself, and through engaging the other on his or her own terms, difficulties might be transformed into possibilities for change in a world anything but innocent” (204). I will conclude, then, by saying that even today, living as we do in a world that seems to grow ever more dependent upon technology, reading “How the First Letter Was Written” and “How the Alphabet Was Made” aloud—especially if we have a child as listener and contributor—can enable us to *hear* the words of Taffy and Tegumai and to feel a sense of awe or wonder at the beauty of sharing that writing continues to make possible.

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ON JULIAN EILMANN'S *J.R.R. TOLKIEN: ROMANTICIST AND POET*,
REVIEWED BY KRIS SWANK IN MYTHLORE #132

NANCY MARTSCH

WITH REGARD TO THE TYPOS IN JULIAN EILMANN'S *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet*, as the person responsible for the "last minute proofreading" (see "Series Editors' Preface") I can shed some light on situation. These are probably the result of the English translation being done "in a very short amount of time" (p iii)—which, by the way, is a nice readable translation.

But first I must say that I consider *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet* to be a very important contribution to Tolkien studies, on a par with Garth and Drout. Every serious Tolkien scholar should read this. It is not an easy read, in part because many English readers are not familiar with the core works of German Romanticism, and may require repeated study. But influence and scholarship does not—should not—stop at national borders. Eilmann demonstrates beyond any doubt (I am tempted to say "with German thoroughness") that Tolkien *was* influenced by German Romanticism, especially through the conduits of Coleridge and MacDonald, and especially in his early writing. I would also suggest, though Eilmann barely touches on it, that Tolkien may have encountered Romanticist ideas through the back door of his studies in philology and folklore, too, because the Germans were the leading scholars in these fields. (Tolkien read German, and his library held studies in German.)

I cannot recommend *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet* highly enough to Mythopoeic Society members.

Now, as to the typos: Dr. Eilmann sent me a PDF copy of his manuscript in connection with a study which I was doing. As I read I noticed some typos, and after a time informed Eilmann about them, which he agreed to