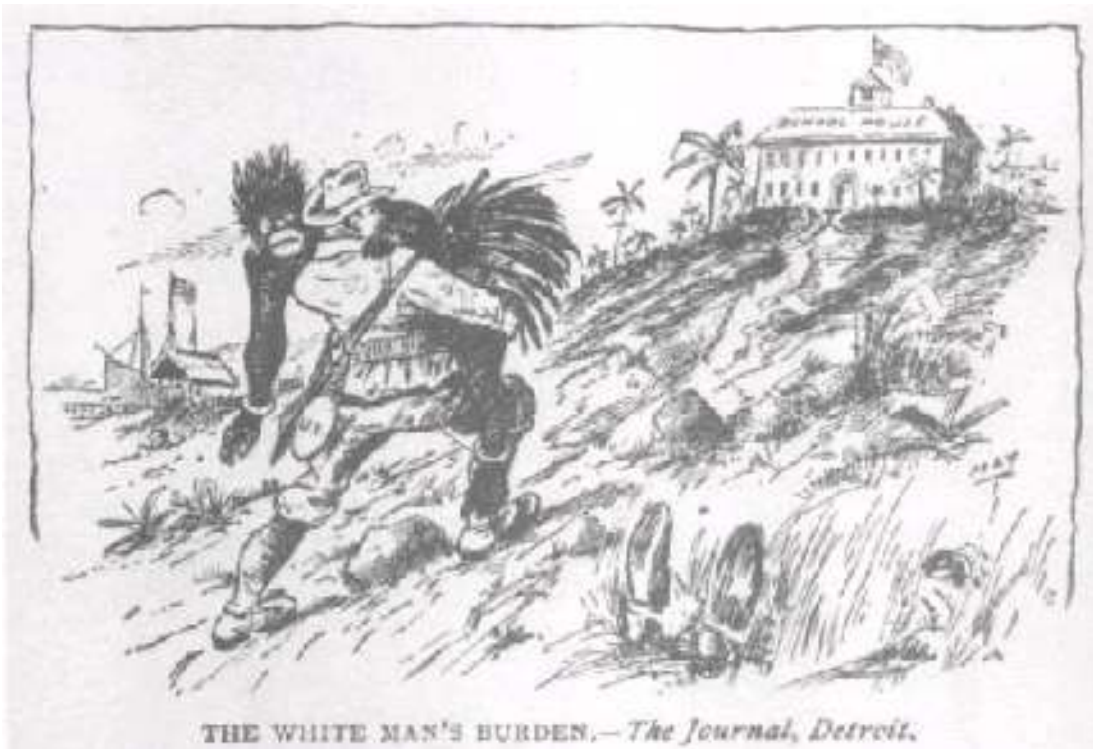


"**The White Man's Burden**" is a poem by the English poet Rudyard Kipling. It was originally published in the popular magazine McClure's in 1899, with the subtitle The United States and the Philippine Islands. Although Kipling's poem mixed exhortation to empire with sober warnings of the costs involved, imperialists within the United States latched onto the phrase "white man's burden" as a characterization for imperialism that justified the policy as a noble enterprise.

The poem was originally written for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, but exchanged for "Recessional"; Kipling changed the text of "Burden" to reflect the subject of American colonization. The poem consists of seven stanzas, following a regular rhyme scheme. At face value it appears to be a rhetorical command to white men to colonize and rule people of other nations for their own benefit (both the people and the duty may be seen as representing the "burden" of the title). Because of its theme and title, it has become emblematic both of Eurocentric racism and of Western aspirations to dominate the developing world. A century after its publication, the poem still rouses strong emotions, and can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives.



The white man's burden - a satirical view from an 1899 edition of Life Magazine



The white man's burden - *The Journal*, Detroit, 1923.

The first step towards enlightening
'The White Man's Burden'
is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

Pears' Soap

is a potent force for enlightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while an ointment is required to all virtues of the darkest places, as the ideal toilet soap.

© 1923 Pears & Co. Ltd.

This 1890s advertisement for soap uses the theme of the White Man's Burden, encouraging white people to teach cleanliness to members of other races

Differing interpretations

A Eurocentric analysis of the poem may conclude that Kipling presents a Eurocentric view of the world, in which non-European cultures are seen as childlike. This view proposes that white people consequently have an obligation to rule over, and encourage the cultural development of people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds until they can take their place in the world by fully adopting Western ways. The term "the white man's burden" has been interpreted as racist, or taken as a metaphor for a condescending view of non-Western national culture and economic traditions, identified as a sense of European ascendancy which has been called "cultural imperialism". An alternative interpretation is the philanthropic view, common in Kipling's formative years, that the rich have a moral duty and obligation to help "the poor" "better" themselves whether the poor want the help or not.

Within a historical context, the poem makes clear the prevalent attitudes that allowed colonialism to proceed. Although a belief in the "virtues of empire" was wide-spread at the time, there were also many dissenters; the publication of the poem caused a flurry of arguments from both sides, most notably from Mark Twain and Henry James. While Kipling may have intended the piece as a form of satire, much of Kipling's other writing does suggest that he genuinely believed in the "beneficent role" which the introduction of Western ideas could play in lifting non-Western peoples out of "poverty and ignorance". Lines 3-5, and other parts of the poem suggest that it is not just the native people who are enslaved, but also the "functionaries of empire", who are caught in colonial service and may die while helping other races "less fortunate" than themselves. An analysis focused on the social status and background of colonial officers active at the time is lacking; as is one of the Christian missionary movement, also quite active at the time in parts of the world under colonial rule (e.g. the Christian and Missionary Alliance) which also emphasized the theme of aiding those "less fortunate."

Some commentators also point to Kipling's history of satirical writing, and suggest that "The White Man's Burden" is in fact meant to undermine imperialism. Chris Snodgrass, in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* describes Kipling's poetry as "imperial sensibilities with wry irony and skepticism, viewing all human endeavors as ultimately transitory". Kipling also wrote many poems celebrating the working classes, particularly the common soldier. Six months after "The White Man's Burden" was published, he wrote "The Old Issue", a stinging criticism of the Second Boer War, and an attack on the unlimited, despotic power of kings. The Norton Anthology of English Literature argues it is no satire, but in line with Kipling's strong imperialism and a belief of a "Divine Burden to reign God's Empire on Earth", that other, less Christian nations would otherwise take.[7] Still, some find Kipling's work fascinating because his pro-imperialist stance did not blind him to the less glamorous and more perilous aspects of imperialism. According to Steve Sailer, writer John Derbyshire has described Kipling as "an imperialist utterly without illusions about what being an imperialist actually means. Which, in some ways, means that he was not really an imperialist at all."

Several parodies and other forms of critical works have used themes or quotes collected from Kipling's poem. Early examples include Henry Labouchère's poem "The Brown Man's Burden" (1899), British journalist Edmund Morel's 1903 article criticizing imperialist practices in Belgian Congo, and Ernest Crosby's poem "The Real White Man's Burden" (1902).

Poetry Analysis—"The White Man's Burden"

This activity asks students to consider British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden"—which urged the U. S. to take up the "burden" of empire, as had Britain and other European nations—and several satirical and critical responses to it. Designed for high school students, this interdisciplinary activity will help students to examine differing perspectives on imperialism at the turn of the century and to understand the use of poetry as a vehicle for expression, protest, and political satire.

Debate over U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century occurred not only in newspapers and political speeches, but in poetry as well. In 1899, the British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote the poem "The White Man's Burden," which urged the U. S. to take up the "burden" of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, copied the poem and sent it to his friend, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, commenting that it was "rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view." Other authors, by contrast, wrote parodies and critiques of Kipling's poem and the imperial ideology it espoused. "The Black Man's Burden" and "The Poor Man's Burden," by H.T. Johnson and George McNeil, respectively, were two such parodies.

Goal: To examine differing perspectives on imperialism at the turn of the century; to understand the use of poetry as a vehicle for expression, protest, and political satire.

"The White Man's Burden": Kipling's Hymn to U.S. Imperialism

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands." In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the "burden" of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Published in the February, 1899 issue of *McClure's Magazine*, the poem coincided with the beginning of the Philippine-American War and U.S. Senate ratification of the treaty that placed Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines under American control. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, copied the poem and sent it to his friend, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, commenting that it was "rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view." Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. The racialized notion of the "White Man's burden" became a euphemism for imperialism, and many anti-imperialists couched their opposition in reaction to the phrase.

This famous poem, written by Britain's imperial poet, was a response to the American take over of the Phillipines after the Spanish-American War.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Send forth the best ye breed--
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild--
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden--
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror

And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden--
The savage wars of peace--
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden--
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper--
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go mark them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden--
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard--
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light:--
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden--
Ye dare not stoop to less--
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloke your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden--
Have done with childish days--
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

Source: Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899.” *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929).

“The Poor Man’s Burden”: Labor Lampoons Kipling

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, described it as “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. In one of many parodies of “The White Man’s Burden” from the time, labor editor George McNeill penned the satirical “Poor Man’s Burden,” published in March, 1899.

The Poor Man’s Burden

(After Kipling)

Pile on the Poor Man’s Burden—

Drive out the beastly breed;

Go bind his sons in exile

To serve your pride and greed;

To wait in heavy harness,

Upon your rich and grand;

The common working peoples,

The serfs of every land.

Pile on the Poor Man’s Burden—

His patience will abide;

He’ll veil the threat of terror

And check the show of pride.

By pious cant and humbug

You’ll show his pathway plain,

To work for another’s profit

And suffer on in pain.

Pile on the Poor Man’s Burden—

Your savage wars increase,
Give him his full of Famine,
Nor bid his sickness cease.
And when your goal is nearest
Your glory's dearly bought,
For the Poor Man in his fury,
May bring your pride to naught.
Pile on the Poor Man's Burden—
Your Monopolistic rings
Shall crush the serf and sweeper
Like iron rule of kings.
Your joys he shall not enter,
Nor pleasant roads shall tread;
He'll make them with his living,
And mar them with his dead.
Pile on the Poor Man's Burden—
The day of reckoning's near—
He will call aloud on Freedom,
And Freedom's God shall hear.
He will try you in the balance;
He will deal out justice true:
For the Poor Man with his burden
Weighs more with God than you.
Lift off the Poor Man's Burden—
My Country, grand and great—
The Orient has no treasures

To buy a Christian state,
Our souls brook not oppression;
Our needs—if read aright—
Call not for wide possession.
But Freedom’s sacred light.

Source: George McNeill, “The Poor Man’s Burden,” *American Federationist* (March 1899).

“The Black Man’s Burden”: A Response to Kipling

In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands.” In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the “burden” of empire, as had Britain and other European nations. Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become vice-president and then president, described it as “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.” Not everyone was as favorably impressed as Roosevelt. African Americans, among many others, objected to the notion of the “white man’s burden.” Among the dozens of replies to Kipling’s poem was “The Black Man’s Burden,” written by African-American clergyman and editor H. T. Johnson and published in April 1899. A “Black Man’s Burden Association” was even organized with the goal of demonstrating that mistreatment of brown people in the Philippines was an extension of the mistreatment of black Americans at home.

Pile on the Black Man’s Burden.
'Tis nearest at your door;
Why heed long bleeding Cuba,
or dark Hawaii’s shore?
Hail ye your fearless armies,
Which menace feeble folks
Who fight with clubs and arrows
and brook your rifle’s smoke.
Pile on the Black Man’s Burden
His wail with laughter drown
You’ve sealed the Red Man’s problem,
And will take up the Brown,
In vain ye seek to end it,

With bullets, blood or death

Better by far defend it

With honor's holy breath.

Source: H.T. Johnson, "The Black Man's Burden," *Voice of Missions*, VII (Atlanta: April 1899), 1. Reprinted in Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898–1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1975, 183–184.

As you read, answer the following questions to guide your understanding of the poems.

1. According to Kipling, and in your own words, what was the "White Man's Burden"?
2. What reward did Kipling suggest the "White Man" gets for carrying his "burden"?
3. Who did Kipling think would read his poem? What do you think that this audience might have said in response to it?
4. For what audiences do you think H.T. Johnson and George McNeil wrote their poems? How do you think those audiences might have responded to "The Black Man's Burden" and "The Poor Man's Burden"?

Writing "Found Poetry"

Working individually or in pairs, list any key words and phrases that stand out to you in each poem. Make a separate list for each poem.

Create a "found" poem — a poem that incorporates some of the chosen key words or phrases with your own words. The poem should convey your views or ideas about imperialism.

Group Discussion

Read the "found" poems with partners or group members and discuss what statements they make about imperialism. If you worked individually, how many of the chosen key words and phrases were the same, and how many were different? How did different people use the same words/phrases? What types of responses do you think your poems would have generated if written in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries?

Adapted from <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>, <http://en.wikipedia.org>