The White Man's Burden

POEM TEXT

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 make 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 !) towards the light: —
"Why brought ye 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 cloak 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 judgement of your peers.

SUMMARY

The speaker exhorts the audience (assumed to be people identifying as "white") to perform a difficult task assigned to them by virtue of their whiteness. This task will require the best people in white society to go forth to another land, with an entire generation of young men essentially being exiled. These young men will be made to serve a foreign people they themselves conquered; paradoxically, the young men will have to serve their own unwilling captives. The young white men will be harnessed like horses awaiting the beck and call of an unreliable, nearly savage people, who have just been captured like prizes in a contest. These same people are not human adults but both childlike and evil.

The speaker again implores the presumed white audience to perform this difficult task. This duty will require patience, and restraint. Though the speaker seems to think that the white race has reason to feel proud in comparison to the non-white races, the whites must restrain themselves from showing their pride in order to govern well. The whites must also use plain and honest language in order to be understood by those they rule. All this will not be for the benefit of whites but for the benefit of those they rule.

The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task. The speaker lays out what will be the goals of the whites who go forth to conquest. They will constantly have to fight wars in order to maintain peace in the lands they rule, and these wars will be especially cruel. The whites will also have to provide food for starving peoples and fight diseases among them. All these specific tasks worked on behalf of the non-whites will be jeopardized even as they near completion by the fact that the non-white, non-Christian races are both lazy and foolish. The speaker insists this will happen despite the whites' best efforts.

The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task. The imperialistic duty that the whites will take up is better than the traditional rule of kings and princes, because it is far more common and more moral. The duty is more like a homely household task than a grand dynastic inheritance. The speaker mentions the roads and ports that the whites will build for the non-whites, neither of which the whites will themselves use, before adding that the whites will not just have to build these amenities, they will also have to die in battle to preserve them from ruin.

The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task. The speaker lays out the supposed rewards of this imperial project, which are negative and thus only rewards in an ironic sense. The whites will make the non-whites better by ruling them, but the non-whites will only respond with spite and blame, even when the whites protect them from worse enemies. The whites will be indulgent in a parental fashion toward the non-whites, who will cry out against their teachings. While the whites slowly bring them toward the light of civilization, the non-white people will cry out for the "Egyptian" darkness of their previous savagery, which they loved.

The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task. To do anything other than take up the burden would mean lowering oneself to an unworthy task. The audience may choose to decline the burden in the name of freedom, either the freedom of the non-white peoples or their own freedom from this responsibility, but to do so would be merely a cheat to hide the exhaustion that is the real reason for refusing the challenge. Moreover, the speaker insists, the non-white peoples will see through the ruse. They will know instantly that the audience declined the challenge from exhaustion and fear, and they will judge them accordingly. If the task is declined, the non-white peoples will judge not just the whites themselves, but the things the whites hold dearest, including their religion and their tradition, as unworthy.

The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task. The speaker then encourages the audience to grow up and put childish ways behind them. This will let the audience refuse tasks that will get them easy praise. Instead, the white audience will have to prove themselves to be adults, even if this task offers little reward over the years. And in the process, they will get the respect of their fellow adults, which is both more honest and more valuable.

THEMES

COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

"The White Man's Burden" presents the conquering of non-white races as white people's selfless moral duty. This conquest, according to the poem, is not for personal or national benefit, but rather for the gain of others—specifically, for the gain of the conquered. The white race will "serve [their] captives' need" rather than their own, and the white conquerors "seek another's profit, / And work another's gain." Even if they do not recognize their benefit, the non-white races will be brought "(Ah, slowly!) toward the light," escaping the "loved Egyptian night" in which they idled before their conquest. Yet the non-whites' positive sentiment for their own "darkness" indicates the extreme difficulty whites will face in seeking to educate the conquered peoples.

By emphasizing the hardships of this "burden," the speaker positions himself as a realist who sees all the difficulties of an imperialist project and the inevitable thanklessness that results. The speaker announces that imperial conquest will "bind your sons to exile" and cause them to "wait in heavy harness" in pursuit of the "savage wars of peace," indications of the difficulty and tedium of the inevitable war. The "silent, sullen peoples" lifted up from "bondage" will never offer the imperialists any thanks or praise.

By taking the difficulty and thanklessness of imperialism seriously, the speaker establishes his credibility as someone of clear-sighted judgement. This stance of realism offers the speaker's argument two key things. First, it staves off the retort that the speaker is some idealist blinded by an impossible dream. The speaker's focus on the difficulty of the task actually has the effect of making that task seem, eventually, achievable, since all the difficulties have already been foreseen. Second, it sets up the speaker (and the European powers the speaker seems connected to) as a kind of stern, realist father figure to America who will offer Americans true respect—"the judgement of your peers" both "cold" and "edged with dear-bought wisdom"—if they fulfill their imperialist task.

Indeed, the poem in many ways appeals to the middle-class virtues of ordinary turn of the 20th century Americans by presenting imperialism as a sober, tedious duty rather than a grand adventure of conquest. Imperialism is a "toil of serf and sweeper," not a "tawdry rule of kings." The larger part of "the white man's burden" is thus an exercise in "patience," accepting the length and difficulty of the task set for the imperialists. Not a calling to a high heroic destiny, but a crude, almost homely task, imperialism suits the desires of those who imagine

themselves honest workers on humanity's behalf, rather than triumphant conquerors of weaker peoples. Put another way, the poem can be seen as cannily playing to the vanity of America precisely by refusing to play to its vanity. The poem is saying to an America that, in 1899, was feeling itself ready to emerge on the world stage: this is how you can stop being a child and grow up.

While the speaker of "The White Man's Burden" can be seen as trying to cannily build an argument that will specifically appeal to a certain set of Americans, it also seems possible that the speaker is not being purely cynical. The speaker seems to believe everything he is saying: that imperialism and colonialism is a thankless task, taken up by whites purely out of goodwill for other races (even if those other races lack the ability to see the gift being bestowed upon them), without any ulterior motive of profit, reward, praise, or even gratitude. This enterprise may not even succeed; references to the task's difficulty far outnumber references to its success. Thus even as the speaker believes it is the white man's duty to engage in conquest, he may also believe that this conquest will fall short of its moral goals. Imperialism, the speaker sincerely believes, is the white man's gracious sacrifice on behalf of non-whites.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-56

RACISM

Racism is not really a *theme* of "The White Man's Burden." The poem doesn't in any way explore or grapple with racism or its effects in the world. And yet it is impossible to discuss "The White Man's Burden" without also discussing racism, because the poem is, simply put, blatantly racist. Its premise—that white imperialism is a moral burden that white races must take up in order to conquer and educate, by force and against their will, the non-white races of the world—is based on a racist worldview. The poem does not even defend or explain the basis of this worldview. Instead, the poem takes it as being obvious and objectively true that white races are superior and civilized, while non-white races are inferior and savage.

The poem's racism toward non-white peoples is so general, so entrenched, and so over-the-top that it would be pointless to seek to identify or refute all of its appearances. However, it is worth pointing out the way that Kipling's racism made him blind to the reality of the white imperialists—and, one might say, to the white race—which "The White Man's Burden" so esteems. There is no honest history of colonialism or imperialism that would describe either the motivations or effects of European or American imperialism as being driven by selfless benevolence or as having purely positive effects. From the devastation and enslavement of native people in the Americas; to the slave trade that developed out of European colonialism in Africa; to the uniquely rapacious corrupt practices of the Belgian Congo; to the profit and power and national pride that Britain derived from its empire on which it gloatingly exulted "the sun never set," white imperialism was never primarily driven by the selfless motives that Kipling ascribes to it.

Of course some imperialists and missionaries set forth with the seemingly-noble goal of "helping the savages," but such efforts were often at best complicated and at worst destructive, as captured in all sorts of books, ranging from *Heart of Darkness*, to *Things Fall Apart*, to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *Heart of Darkness*, before the main character Marlow sets off to Africa, he has a farewell conversation with his aunt. She sees Marlow as being "an emissary of light" off to educate the African natives out of their "horrid ways." Marlow points out to his aunt that the company he is working with is run for profit, and despairs at his aunt's inability to see past illusion to the truth. Later, Marlow will see this inability as a veneer that allowed European society to hide its rapaciousness from itself, and therefore as a key part of the heart of darkness that lies at the root of Western Civilization. One can certainly argue that the Kipling of "The White Man's Burden" has much in common with that nameless, racist aunt.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-56

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Take up the White Man's burden —

The first line is a strict command addressed to the reader—someone the speaker clearly assumes must be white. The capitalization of "the White Man" indicates that the poem addresses white people in general and calls on them to answer some destiny related to their whiteness. The use of the definite article "the White Man's burden" further indicates that readers already *know* this burden, which is a key piece of the poem's argument. The White Man's burden is familiar; everyone knows about it, and thus denying it means denying a moral duty obvious to the rest of the world.

The staccato rhythm of iambs (da DUM) drives home the forcefulness of the order, which brooks no discussion or response:

Take up the White Man's burden —

This meter will repeat throughout the poem. The first line repeats throughout the poem as well, becoming a sort of refrain or chorus. The command repeats so regularly as to

make its words linger in the mind after the poem is completed, with the phrase arguably becoming a synecdoche of the whole poem. "Take up the White Man's Burden" is the poem's entire argument encapsulated into its central, oft-repeated phrase.

LINES 2-8

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.

The first stanza consists of a couple of seeming contradictions that generally characterize the sacrifice of whites in favor of their so-called inferiors.

Whites must "bind [their] sons to exile / To serve [their] captives' need." In other words, the *best* white people must be dedicated to (what the speaker believes to be) the *worst* of humanity. The white people are thus metaphorically presented as both exiles—people expelled from their homes—and beasts of burden. They must wear a "heavy harness," like that worn by oxen, as they figuratively pull so-called wild people forward toward civilization. This metaphor implies that the whites must drag the non-white races behind them, as draft animals draw their load. The alliteration of the /h/ sound in "heavy harness" requires a double exhale of breath, reflecting the weight of this burden.

The poem's view of history is as a movement from savagery to civilization, from one form of life to another. Thus, the non-white peoples are "half child," not physically matured or advanced to their state of adulthood. The white people, however, have matured themselves. Their "sons" are "the best [they] breed."

This idea of history itself as a form of progress from one state to another dates back to at least the 18th century, when Europeans created the idea of modernity as an advancement on the so-called "primitive" cultures from which they distinguished themselves. Despite the speaker's confident dismissal of non-white peoples, the idea of "modernity," distinguished from "savagery," is a form of colonial justification—not a coherent theory of history, but a means of explaining the white right to conquer and control the other races.

The stanza continues the steady iambic (da DUM) meter established by the first line, as well as an ABCD EFGF rhyme scheme. The rhymes are full, perfect rhymes ("breed" and "need," for example). This formal simplicity and consistency helps the poem feel cohesive and controlled, and also allows readers' to focus on the speaker's argument itself.

LINES 9-16

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.

The speaker repeats the call from the first stanza for white people to do what the speaker considers to be their duty. The speaker then characterizes white people in general as possessed of great competence and power than other races, but constantly needing to *restrain* their own capacity. White people must cast a "veil" over their terrible power lest they frighten the non-white peoples beyond the point they can handle.

The phrase"[i]n patience to abide" introduces an image of "the White Man's burden" as a form of strategic inaction. That is, white people must hold back their natural activity and instead "abide" through "patience," waiting on their supposed inferiors to catch up in the race toward civilization.

The commitment to patience indicates the religious nature of both the call to colonization (that is, the call to establish dominance over indigenous peoples) and the way that this colonization is carried out. White people, the speaker argues, must practice the Christian virtue of patience when they go about colonizing non-white peoples. Instead of putting forth their full strength, white people must put on a mild face, just as Christ suggested turning the other cheek when struck. This idea allows the speaker to maintain that white people are both more powerful than non-white peoples—their "threat" would terrorize non-white peoples beyond their capacity to handle it—but also more moral, since they *choose* not to activate their full ability to terrify. Likewise, the instruction to "check the show of pride" involves resisting pride, the foremost of Christian sins.

White people, the speaker continues, must do all this on behalf of "another's profit" and "another's gain." The repetition of "another" here, technically an example of diacope, reflects the speaker's belief that this is all selfless on white people's part. Indeed, that's why it's a "burden."

This stanza also contains frequent alliteration and consonance, especially of the /p/ sounds:

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

This is an energetic sound that adds a sense of urgency and emphasis to the speaker's call to action. The regular rhyme scheme and meter established in the poem's first stanza continue here as well. In keeping these formal elements of the poem regular and straightforward, the speaker allows readers to focus more on the message of the poem itself.

LINES 17-24

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.

The speaker next compares the "White Man's burden" to "savage wars of peace." This seems, at first, like a paradox: how can a "savage war" also be "peace"? The speaker is saying that the process to peace will be difficult and violent, but that it is all done on behalf of moving these allegedly "savage" peoples toward a state of peaceful civilization. Essentially, the speaker is implying that colonialism inevitably will entail violence towards indigenous peoples, but that this is okay because it is being done in service of a greater good (that this is a deeply racist viewpoint goes without saying, but it wasn't uncommon in at the time Kipling wrote this poem).

The speaker also says that white people must resist the difficult, impersonal forces that rage through the civilizations of the so-called savage races. These forces include "famine," "sickness," "Sloth," and "Folly." These latter two are explicitly personified by their initial capital letters, but all four represent toxic, almost demonic powers that wildly ravage through the world of their conquered peoples. White people must fight these impersonal powers. If a conquered people should rebel, it is not because of their own wishes but because of "heathen Folly" working like a dark god to drive them toward diabolic rebellion.

Characterizing these forces as abstractions transforms the wishes of the non-white races into moral evils not representing the agencies of human beings. The white people must wage "[t]he savage wars of peace" to maintain their empire, but they fight ultimately not against human beings, whose wills differ from their own, but against diabolic, savage aspects of nature itself. In this way, the speaker characterizes the struggle of whites as a grand strife with nature itself, a means of resisting the natural evil of Original Sin, in pursuit of the higher, Christian virtues that created and protect their civilization.

Fittingly, this stanza is filled with sibilance—evoking the hissing of snakes, the representation of evil in the Bible. There is also a great deal of consonance of the /f/ sound—a soft sound that supports this sibilance (and is, in fact, sometimes characterized as a form of sibilance itself).

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.

The sounds of the stanza thus add to its sinister tone, reflecting that idea that colonization is part of a broader war between good and evil.

LINES 25-32

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 make them with your living,
And mark them with your dead !

Having called white people to do their duty, the speaker next creates an antithesis between what the old world of Europe characterized as noble—the "rule of kings"—and what the new world of America and England upholds as true virtue. The word "tawdry" means showy but ultimately cheap, sordid, and unpleasant. The implication is that the "rule of kings" was shallow and morally corrupt despite its flashiness.

By contrast, the task of these more modern white people is a "toil of serf and sweeper," meaning the "White Man's burden" is most similar to the tasks performed by those at the very bottom of society (a "serf" was essentially a kind of slave in feudal Europe, typically an agricultural laborer bound to work the land for a nobleman). The speaker includes egalitarian language in order to *differentiate* this modern "burden" from the past "tawdry rule of kings." This is part of an effort to make imperialism appear as a project compatible with modern democracy and capitalism, rather than something belonging to an antiquated past when individual nobles or kings conquered people on behalf of their own, personal glory.

Here, the speaker also rejects all the possibilities of reward by aligning three realities about imperial conquest. It is a "tale of common things" and consists in building "ports" and protecting them even to the point of death. It is no grander an adventure than is building infrastructure in one's own nation, but it is more vital and even more Christian because it is done on behalf of someone else. The parallelism of these phrases is meant to emphasize the allegedly selfless nature of this project, while creates "ports" and "roads" that these white saviors themselves "shall not" actually use. From this perspective, colonialism

represents the American ideal of equality, spread across the entire globe, as it seeks to bring non-white peoples up from savagery to higher civilization.

LINES 33-40

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 !) towards the light: —
"Why brought ye us from bondage,
"Our loved Egyptian night ?"

In this stanza, the speaker continues to insist that the "White Man's burden" is a selfless, thankless task. The "reward" mentioned in line 34 is meant to be ironic; what the speaker goes on to describe is hardly akin to a prize. Instead, for all their trouble, white people will receive "blame" from the very people they're trying to "better," and "hate" from the people they "guard," or protect. The alliteration of these lines adds dramatic emphasis to the speaker's point. Note how the guttural /r/ sounds of "reap his old reward" makes the phrase sound angry, while the /b/ of "blame" and "better" suggests the speaker is spitting these words out with a certain disdain. The fact that this is an "old" reward further suggests that this has always been the case—that white people have never been properly thanked for their alleged service to the rest of civilization. For all this talk of bettering humanity, it certainly seems like the speaker has a chip on his shoulder!

The speaker also establishes a contrast between the "light" of white civilization and the "night" of non-white civilization. This contrast upholds the racist belief that light-skinned races are superior to dark-skinned races. The speaker places an absurd exclamation into the mouths of the non-whites, one that further builds up the idea of their superstitious "night." This darkness is specifically called "Egyptian" in order to allude to images of superstition, ignorance, and oppression, as Egypt is traditionally contrasted with the supposedly enlightened, sophisticated, and free societies of Greece and Rome. (Of course, this is again an extremely racist, and fundamentally incorrect, vision of ancient history.)

The non-white peoples, as imagined by the speaker, are hopelessly dedicated to their own superstitious ways. When brought to a higher form of civilization by white people, they thus cry out on behalf of the "bondage" they once enjoyed, actually *preferring* that bondage to the freedom they enjoy under white rule. This section expands on the previous idea that the non-whites peoples' "Sloth and heathen Folly" will butt up against the efforts of white people to civilize them.

This moment pushes close to absurdity, opening up the possibility that the poem is again being ironic here. The absurdity of a cry to return to bondage may indicate the possibility that the poem's final word is not *actually* the speaker's. Perhaps, read generously, the *speaker* is *foolish* enough to believe these silly beliefs about non-white people. The speaker fails completely to understand the people the speaker *thinks* he knows, and through this gap, the speaker may possibly reveal that white colonization is doomed to fail because of the white people's *misunderstanding* of their colonial subjects. Of course, this is again a very generous reading of the poem; it is just as likely, and makes for a more straightforward reading, to assume that the poem is in fact just racist.

LINES 41-48

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

Having now repeatedly described how thankless this task will be, the speaker goes on to insist that white people nevertheless must not shrink from their supposed duty. The speaker personifies "Freedom" to describe the way the speaker believes white people, specifically Americans, will attempt to use their own values to try to shrink from the task of imperial conquest. Americans might call on the noble name of Freedom in order to escape from this "burden" (the implication being that white people are "free" to do as they please, and that non-white peoples should be "free" from foreign rulers). But the speaker sees through this alleged ruse, to the reality that these Americans are merely too exhausted, too full of "weariness," to do what the speaker has deemed necessary. That is, they aren't *actually* invoking the ideals of freedom, in the speaker's mind, but simply are too tired to undertake such a difficult task and are calling on "Freedom" as an excuse.

In this way, the speaker resembles those "silent sullen peoples" in that the speaker sees directly through appearances and even noble ideals like "Freedom." Like them, the speaker prefers plain realities to noble fictions. Further, the "silent sullen peoples" will judge not only these white *people* who refuse their duty themselves, but also their highest *values*, their "Gods," as the speaker says. The sibilance of "silent sullen" evokes the quiet judgment of these peoples.

The phrase "your Gods" evokes the antique Roman past, where the imperial conquest of the Romans demonstrated the power of their gods to the conquered people. According to the speaker, the Americans' god is "Freedom" itself, and by refusing to rule, the Americans will actually expose the noble ideal of freedom to bitter reproach by the non-white peoples. By tracing this paradoxical scheme, the speaker implies that the only thing Americans can do to maintain their dignity is to

pursue imperial conquest.

LINES 49-56

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 judgement of your peers.

The speaker concludes the poem by imagining the fame and respect the Americans will earn through their imperial conquest. He contrasts the "lightly proffered laurel" with the "dear-bought wisdom" that is the *true* reward for undertaking this "burden." The laurel is a leaf from the laurel tree, a plant used in classical civilizations as the reward of great heroes and poets. This tangible reward is cheap fame, however, deemed "easy, ungrudged praise." It is contrasted with the true fame the Americans will receive from their "peers," the great imperial powers of Europe. The European princes understand the true difficulty and thanklessness of imperialism, knowing that "[t]he silent sullen peoples" will never express gratitude for their supposed betterment.

Thus, the judgement of the European peers represents a higher, more sublime reward: the recognition of a moral aim accomplished or at least attempted. By contrasting a physical reward with a silent judgement, the speaker also suggests that the true reward is having acted ethically, rather than having achieved a material victory. The speaker finally suggests that for the Americans to engage in colonial rule is for them to "grow up" as a nation and join the world of the great powers of Europe. America, as a new nation, must leave its "childish days" behind and "search [its] manhood" if it is to earn the respect of the rest of the world.

SYMBOLS

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Light—and its absence—are used in the poem to represent the contrast between civilization and savagery. Light is defined as the province of whiteness and stands in for freedom and civilization. According to the speaker, this is contrasted against "Egyptian night." This night is characterized as a state of bondage that reflects the ignorance in which non-white peoples live. As such, according to the poem, white people must lead non-white races "towards the light"—that is, towards civilization.

Because this endeavor is presented as a moral necessity, "light" is further associated with virtue. And because the speaker insists on the unselfishness of white people in their conquest, the speaker implicitly attributes special moral qualities to whiteness itself. Unlike the non-white races, white people undertake deadly enterprises on behalf of others. By calling the non-white people "[h]alf devil and half child," the speaker again contrasts a devilish darkness (devils were often presented as dark-skinned in older European art) with an angelic whiteness.

This moral quality contrasts with the "Egyptian night" that is "loved" by non-white peoples. The specific allusion to this being an "Egyptian" night is another dig at non-white peoples. Ancient Egypt was a polytheistic society that had gods for many purposes and social realities. But Christianity, the speaker implies, is simple and pure, like light. The Egyptian night of polytheistic superstition keeps the non-white peoples in "bondage."

This is despite the fact that none of the countries considered for American imperialistic conquest were Egyptian, nor worshipped the gods of Egypt. Instead, "Egyptian night" in the poem, represents non-white civilizations in general, especially insofar as they are non-Christian. The contrast is generalized, and it is based on the older, classical contrast between supposedly superstitious Egypt and the allegedly more enlightened and sophisticated Greece and Rome. This idea is, of course, both racist and untrue. Indeed, as noted in this guide's thematic discussion of racism, the symbolic differentiation between light and darkness being presented in the poem is itself deeply racist.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Half devil and half child."
- **Line 38:** "light"
- **Line 40:** "Egyptian night"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

In "The White Man's Burden," anaphora creates a sense of formal unity. The repetition of the opening line acts almost like a chorus in a song. This sentence—"Take up the White Man's Burden"—becomes a sort of refrain that gives the poem a structure. Some may not classify this as true anaphora, and instead treat it more as a general form of repetition. Regardless, the phrase, and its repetition, is clearly a very important component of this poem.

What exactly this burden *is* is gradually made clear as the poem continues, and each verse adds detail to the nature of this burden. It is a difficult task requiring patience and persistence; it is a thankless endeavor that, nevertheless, must be completed for the betterment of humanity. The repetition of this line reiterates in each successive stanza that, regardless of

its demands, it is imperative that white people do what they have to do (according to the speaker, at least). The successive use of the phrase builds up emphasis throughout the poem, driving home the point—that this burden *must* be undertaken—by its constant repetition.

This insistent repetition of the phrase not only emphasizes the poem's central message, but also seems clearly designed to transcend the poem and enter the popular vocabulary. "Take up the White Man's burden" lingers in the mind after each reading almost like a complete encapsulation of the poem itself. If the reader remembers one thing from the poem, it will likely be the phrase "White Man's burden" itself.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Take up the White Man's burden — "
- **Line 4:** "To"
- **Line 5:** "To"
- **Line 9:** "Take up the White Man's burden — "
- **Line 11:** "To"
- **Line 15:** "To"
- **Line 17:** "Take up the White Man's burden —"
- **Line 25:** "Take up the White Man's burden —"
- **Line 28:** "The"
- **Line 29:** "The"
- **Line 30:** "The"
- **Line 33:** "Take up the White Man's burden —"
- **Line 35:** "The"
- **Line 36:** "The"
- **Line 37:** "The"
- **Line 41:** "Take up the White Man's burden —"
- **Line 47:** "The"
- **Line 49:** "Take up the White Man's burden —"
- **Line 51:** "The"
- **Line 52:** "The"
- **Line 56:** "The"

PARATAXIS

In this poem, parataxis keeps the ideas and concepts simple. Rather than elaborate, embedded sentences, the poem consists mostly of direct statements and concepts that build on each other successively. The style of the poem therefore comes across as snappy and direct, each phrase hitting with equal weight as all the others, as in:

> Take up the White Man's burden —
> No tawdry rule of kings,
> But toil of serf and sweeper
> The tale of common things.

"No tawdry rule of kings" stands in equal, ambiguous relationship to "The tale of common things." It is unclear whether "the tale of common things" is the same as "the tawdry rule of kings" or a replacement for it. This ambiguity among the clauses in a sentence is especially important when the speaker places all the various tasks of imperial conquest into indefinite relationship. The moral status of these ideas in comparison with each other must be determined by the reader. The tasks *themselves* are treated as though they are equivalent, even in cases when one task has a true moral weight that another does not have (as when "[t]he savage wars of peace" is placed alongside hunger in the line "[f]ill full the mouth of famine").

Parataxis thus contributes to the poem's moral argument for imperialism by engendering a confusion between genuinely ethical tasks, such as ending famine, with self-serving colonial tasks like the suppression of rebellion.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "The savage wars of peace — / Fill full the mouth of famine / And bid the sickness cease; "
- **Lines 26-32:** "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 make them with your living, / And mark them with your dead !"
- **Lines 35-37:** "The blame of those ye better, / The hate of those ye guard — / The cry of hosts ye humour "
- **Lines 51-52:** "The lightly proffered laurel, / The easy, ungrudged praise. "

ALLITERATION

The poem's alliteration makes many of its phrases more memorable. For example, in line 19, "Fill full the mouth of famine" sticks in the mind as a balanced, complete phrase by virtue of the alliterated /f/ sounds. The same could be said of the final stanza, with the shared /d/ sounds of "done" and "days" in line 50 and the /l/ sounds of "lightly" and "laurel" in line 51. Both lines contain a single sound that clearly alliterates two times, creating a pleasing sense of formal unity between these lines.

The poem's alliteration also suggests connections between words on a more thematic level. In line 5, the /h/ of "heavy harness" draws readers' attention to this phrase and also binds these two words together. The physical effort it takes to say "heavy harness"—with the double release of breath on the /h/ sound—is almost like panting, and the evokes the difficulty and weight of the burden being undertaken. In lines 31 and 32, the alliteration (and /k/ sound consonance) of "make" and "mark" reflects the inescapable connection between these two actions:

> Go make them with your living,
> And mark them with your dead!

Both actions must be undertaken as part of the "White Man's burden," according to the speaker, and the shared sound of the

words here emphasizes that fact.

Later, the guttural /r/ sound of "reap his old reward" in line 34 suggests a tightly clenched jaw, perhaps evoking the speaker's thinly-veiled bitterness/exasperation at not receiving any thanks for all these efforts to allegedly help non-white peoples. The plosive /b/ of "blame of those ye better" in the next line adds to this tone, as though the speaker is spitting out these words and emphasizing how unfair it is that the people being "better[ed]" only "blame," rather than reward, their white saviors.

Often the alliteration in the poem takes the specific form of sibilance. This can be seen in "silent sullen peoples" in line 47. The hushed /s/ sound here reflects the nature of the people being described.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "best," "breed"
- **Line 3:** "bind"
- **Line 5:** "heavy harness"
- **Line 6:** " fluttered folk "
- **Line 12:** "pride"
- **Line 13:** "speech," "simple"
- **Line 14:** "plain"
- **Line 15:** "seek," "profit"
- **Line 19:** "Fill full," "famine"
- **Line 20:** "sickness cease"
- **Line 22:** "sought"
- **Line 23:** "Sloth"
- **Line 26:** "tawdry"
- **Line 27:** "toil," "serf and sweeper"
- **Line 28:** "tale"
- **Line 31:** "make"
- **Line 32:** "mark"
- **Line 34:** "reap," "reward"
- **Line 35:** "blame," "better"
- **Line 37:** "hosts," "humour"
- **Line 39:** "brought," "bondage"
- **Line 47:** "silent sullen"
- **Line 50:** "done," "days"
- **Line 51:** "lightly," "laurel"
- **Line 54:** "Through," "the thankless"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification a handful of times, which readers can often spot through the speaker's use of capitalization. The speaker capitalizes "Freedom," "Sloth," and "Folly," and treats them as if they are proper nouns, as beings with agency. The "mouth of famine," meanwhile, treats the abstract idea like a human person, with the same starving mouth that characterizes those suffering from famine.

"Sloth" and "Folly" perform actions in the place of the native peoples whom these ideas represent. The use of personification for the ideas of sloth and folly removes agency from the native peoples whom the whites have colonized. The natives *themselves* disappear, while these large abstract ideas act in their place and represent forces that the whites must counter.

In this way the speaker makes the very wishes and desires of the native peoples into abstract "vices" that must be defeated. "Sloth and heathen Folly" is a characterization of the very real resistance of native people toward their white colonizers, but by being described in this way, that resistance becomes merely an emblem of sinfulness, something to be overcome by the virtue of whites. In all, personification serves to abstract and depersonalize the real human toll of white colonizers' war on non-white peoples.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "Fill full the mouth of famine"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Watch Sloth and heathen Folly / Bring all your hopes to nought."
- **Lines 43-44:** "Nor call too loud on Freedom / To cloak your weariness; "

PARALLELISM

"The White Man's Burden" repeatedly turns to parallelism to reiterate and reinforce its ideas. This often dovetails with other poetic devices related to repetition. In lines 15 and 16, for example, parallel construction combines with the diacope of "another's" to emphasize the fact that, according to the speaker, white people must undertake this burden not for their *own* benefit, but for the benefit of *someone else*:

> To seek another's profit,
> And work another's gain.

The grammatical structure of these two lines is the same, with a verb ("seek"/"work"), followed by "another's," followed by a synonym for "benefit." The speaker is simply doubling down on his point, something he uses parallelism to do throughout the poem. Take lines 29-30:

> The ports ye shall not enter,
> The roads ye shall not tread,

Again, these lines feature the *exact* same grammatical construction, with only the specific verbs and nouns swapped out. Together, these lines underscore the allegedly selfless nature of imperialism, as white people will construct ports and roads that they themselves will not actually use. The next two lines are once again parallel in their structure:

> Go make them with your living,
> And mark them with your dead!

The parallelism here also features a moment of contrast or antithesis in order to again highlight the extent of this "burden." Not only must white people send their best young men to construct civilization for non-white peoples, but some of these white men will also die in the process of doing so. Everything from their life o death is done in service of the imperialist cause, a notion further emphasized by the consonance of "make" and "mark."

The poem is meant to be a kind of rousing speech, and the speaker turns to parallelism again and again to drive home his point.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "To serve"
- **Line 5:** "To," " wait"
- **Lines 15-16:** "To seek another's profit, / And work another's gain."
- **Lines 29-30:** "The ports ye shall not enter, / The roads ye shall not tread, "
- **Lines 31-32:** "Go make them with your living, / And mark them with your dead !"
- **Lines 35-36:** "The blame of those ye better, / The hate of those ye guard — "
- **Line 37:** "The cry of hosts ye humour "
- **Lines 45-46:** "By all ye cry or whisper, / By all ye leave or do, "
- **Lines 51-52:** "The lightly proffered laurel, / The easy, ungrudged praise. "

CONSONANCE

Consonance works alongside and supports the poem's frequent use of alliteration. It, like alliteration, helps draw readers' attention to certain ideas and make various phrases more memorable. This poem is meant to be taken as a sort of rousing speech, and the use of devices like consonance and alliteration contribute to its rhetorical intensity.

In the latter half of the first stanza, for example, the repetition of the /l/ sound creates a sense of continuity in the speaker's description of non-white peoples:

> On fluttered folk and wild —
> Your new-caught sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child.

Later, the /p/ sounds pops throughout the second stanza. This percussive sound punctuates the speaker's argument, suggesting the sheer insistence with which he is speaking; it is almost as if he is spitting out the words. The hard /k/ consonance at the end of the stanza does the same thing. Here is a closer look at these sounds in lines 13-16:

> By open speech and simple,
> An hundred times made plain,
> To seek another's profit,
> And work another's gain.

In the poem's final stanza, consonance again ramps up the poem's emotional intensity. Take line 50, with the repetition of /d/ sounds in "have done with childish days." The consonance here makes the phrase feel all the more memorable, almost like an aphorism. That is the point: the speaker views his poem as conveying an essential truth about humanity.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "burden"
- **Line 2:** "Send," "best," "breed"
- **Line 3:** "bind," "sons"
- **Line 4:** "serve"
- **Line 5:** "heavy harness"
- **Line 6:** "fluttered folk," "wild"
- **Line 7:** "sullen peoples"
- **Line 8:** "devil," "child"
- **Line 10:** "patience"
- **Line 12:** "pride"
- **Line 13:** "open speech," "simple"
- **Line 14:** "plain"
- **Line 15:** "seek," "profit"
- **Line 16:** "work"
- **Line 18:** "savage," "peace"
- **Line 19:** "Fill full," "famine"
- **Line 20:** "sickness cease"
- **Line 21:** "nearest"
- **Line 22:** "sought"
- **Line 23:** "Sloth"
- **Line 26:** "tawdry"
- **Line 27:** "toil," "serf," "sweeper"
- **Line 28:** "tale"
- **Line 31:** "make"
- **Line 32:** "mark"
- **Line 34:** "reap," "reward"
- **Line 35:** "blame," "better"
- **Line 37:** "hosts," "humour"
- **Line 39:** "brought," "bondage"
- **Line 42:** "stoop," "less"
- **Line 43:** "call," "loud"
- **Line 44:** "cloak"
- **Line 45:** "cry"
- **Line 46:** "all," "leave"
- **Line 47:** "silent sullen peoples "
- **Line 48:** "Shall"
- **Line 50:** "done," "childish days"
- **Line 51:** "lightly," "proffered," "laurel"
- **Line 52:** "ungrudged," "praise"
- **Line 54:** "Through," "the thankless"
- **Line 55:** "Cold," "edged," "dear," "wisdom"

- **Line 56:** "judgement"

VOCABULARY

Burden (Line 1, Line 9, Line 17, Line 33, Line 41, Line 49) - A "burden" is literally a heavy load carried by a person or an animal, but it also means figuratively a difficult task or responsibility, here the task of imperialistic conquest and rule.

Ye (Line 2, Line 29, Line 30, Line 35, Line 36, Line 37, Line 42, Line 45, Line 46) - "Ye" is the archaic plural form of "you." This word indicates that the speaker is addressing a group of people (specifically, given the poem's context, the American public).

Captives (Line 4) - In an unusual usage, "captives" means the peoples conquered by the Americans, rather than its usual meaning of "prisoners."

Heavy harness (Line 5) - Taking up the literal meaning of "burden" as a load carried by an animal, "heavy harness" is a series of straps that bind a draft animal, like a horse or oxen, to the objects or riders the animal pulls. In this context, the white man is the draft animal, while the non-white peoples are the burden pulled behind.

Fluttered (Line 6) - "Fluttered" is an archaic, intransitive usage meaning moving irregularly or in an agitated fashion. Here it indicates the restlessness of the non-white peoples.

Sullen (Line 7, Line 47) - "Sullen" means gloomily silent. Here it suggests the conquered peoples will be non-responsive and ill-tempered after their conquest.

Reap (Line 34) - "Reap" means to harvest something, typically a crop. Here it extends the metaphor of white people as beasts of burden, with spite and scorn as the harvest of their labors.

Proffered (Line 51) - "Proffered" means offered.

Laurel (Line 51) - A leaf from a special tree, a "laurel" is the traditional reward of heroes and poets in the classical civilizations.

Ungrudged (Line 52) - "Ungrudged" refers to something offered or performed willingly, the opposite of "grudged" or "grudging."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The White Man's Burden" consists of seven rhyming octaves, or eight-line stanzas. Each stanza begins with the same line—"Take up the White Man's burden"—creating a sort of refrain throughout the poem. The lines are also all quite similar in length. Altogether, this grants the poem a sense of steadiness and predictability that is meant to add weight to the speaker's argument. There are few poetic flourishes, and the form is sturdy and assured. The poem can also be understood as a kind of public speech rather than a private utterance or personal correspondence. Its tone is senatorial, its audience general; it is built to convey an argument rather than to display the speaker's poetic virtuosity.

METER

"The White Man's Burden" is mostly written in iambic trimeter, making for short, punchy lines that drive its points home. An iamb is a poetic food with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, while trimeter simply means there are three of these feet per line. For example, here is line 2:

> Send forth the best ye breed —

The non-rhyming lines (odd-numbered) in the poem are slightly different. These include something called feminine endings, which means that they have an extra, unstressed syllable after the proper final stress:

> Take up the White Man's burden —

The final unstressed syllable helps to propel the poem forward. Because the poem is made up of iambs, readers expect each line to end with a stressed beat. The lines with feminine endings, like the one quoted above, thus leave the reader waiting for the line that will end with a stressed syllable and give a feeling of closure. Indeed, each stanza ends with a clear, firm stressed syllable.

This pattern is repeated throughout the poem. The regular iambic rhythm is steady and familiar, allowing readers to focus on the speaker's *arguments* rather than getting tripped up in strange metrical variations.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has a clear, regular rhyme scheme in each stanza:

> ABCBDEFE

The repetition of the first line of every stanza ("Take up the White Man's burden") becomes a sort of refrain. The first line that follows this phrase is always part of a rhyming pair (the "B" rhymes in the scheme above), and the last line of every stanza has a rhyming pair as well (the "E" rhymes). This gives the beginning of each stanza a sense of formal rhythm and energy, and it also gives the last line a sense of closure.

The rhyme scheme's regularity and simplicity creates an air of unaffected straightforwardness throughout the poem. This is crucial for the poem's implicit sense that the speaker is a realist who uses simple words and concepts rather than elaborate rhetoric to make a point. The speaker wants to come across as a straight-talker, and the lack of a more complicated rhyme scheme contributes to this characterization.

This simple rhyme scheme also allows the speaker to address a wide audience, including those who might not consider themselves readers of poetry. By keeping things simple, the speaker can address those who are interested in public affairs, rather than strictly those who want to read poetry.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The White Man's Burden" is anonymous. That said, there is good reason to identify the speaker with Kipling himself. For one thing, Kipling's contemporaries did so. U.S. Senator Benjamin Tillman presented the poem to Congress and to President McKinley as the direct words of Rudyard Kipling, "the greatest poet of England at this time."

"This man has lived in the Indies," Tillman added. "In fact he is a citizen of the world, and has been all over it, and knows whereof he speaks." As Tillman's characterization of the poem implies, Kipling was known as an important chronicler and defender of English imperialism. He lived in India for many years and reported on the experience of both colonizers and the colonized in that region. His novels frequently described the experience of British soldiers and administrators in India as well as Indians under colonial rule.

The speaker's commitment to imperialism is absolute, resulting in occasional slips of what seems like dramatic irony to modern readers. For instance, the speaker ventriloquizes the conquered natives with a sentence almost too absurd to be believed: "Why brought ye us from bondage / Our loved Egyptian night?" The sentence may indicate that the speaker has an absurd opinion of the non-white peoples, as persons who actually *love* bondage.

Further, "the savage wars of peace" is an oxymoron, again indicative of dramatic irony. While the speaker means to insist these wars are only waged on behalf of peace, as wars they must necessarily put an *end* to peace. Moreover, they are "savage," much like the natives the white people mean to conquer. The phrase may imply that the speaker has not realized the extent to which his moral superiority to the non-whites is an utter delusion—though this irony was likely unintentional on Kipling's part. It is very often taken as fact that the poet himself simply *was* this racist, and that these slips into absurdity are the result of his fervent belief in white supremacy.

SETTING

The setting of "The White Man's Burden" is essentially the entire globe, at least as it was conceived of by the Western world at the end of the 19th century. While historical context teaches that the poem is addressed to the American public, the poem itself implies an audience of the white race in general.

The poem thus addresses Western Europeans, Americans, and the many Europeans who settled or colonized myriad parts of the globe. These Europeans themselves are directed toward an unspecified number of locales in the globe not yet under European control.

Kipling's specific target was the Philippines, several islands in the South China Sea populated by native Filipinos and previously controlled by the Spanish empire. At the time of the poem, the islands and their inhabitants had been won in conquest from Spain by the U.S. Navy. The poem implicitly includes this geographic area in its setting. It also includes Egypt, which is used to characterize non-white nations in general.

The time span conceived by the poem is immensely large. As empire builders, the white nations will stay in the areas of their conquest for a long time. Phrases like "(Ah, slowly!) toward the light!" indicate the long duration of white conquest.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The White Man's Burden" is a poem, but it is also a political speech directed toward America, Kipling's relatively new home as of 1899. It entered the public debate around American involvement in the Philippine Islands, and as such, it inspired many responses, in the form of speeches and essays but also in poems. Many of these parodied the distinctive style and commanding tone of "The White Man's Burden."

One distinguished response came from the American writer and humorist Mark Twain. Twain authored the essay "To the One Sitting in Darkness," a scathing critique of European and American imperialism that was largely seen as a response to Kipling's poem. The essay draws on the recent imperialistic disaster, the Boxer Rebellion, to show that, in fact, the resistance to white imperialism is not "Folly" but a spirited desire for freedom on the part of non-white peoples.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The White Man's Burden" exists in two contexts. In its original version, the poem commemorated Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, the 60th anniversary of her rule. Among Victoria's many titles was "Empress of India," an indication of the widespread colonialist project that proceeded during her reign. Victoria's reign represented one of the high points of English imperialism, the age when the English boasted to have an empire on which the sun never set.

Kipling wrote this poem to celebrate Victoria's supposed success in imperialistic conquest and what he believed was the powerful moral duty behind this imperialism. Kipling himself was famous as a journalist in British colonial India, and his novels display the conditions of ordinary people in the mixed

regime of colonialist India and other territories under British rule. The original poem is thus a defense of British imperialism by a man who would know that imperialism and its effects very well.

The second, and arguably more important context, came about when the poem achieved its final form in 1899. In this version, Kipling addressed not the British monarchy but the American public. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the United States found itself in possession of the Philippine Islands and other territories of the Spanish East Indies. The Philippine Islands themselves were seen as the prize, despite the fact that the Philippine nationals had declared their independence as the Philippine Republic in 1898. Neither the United States nor the Spanish had recognized Philippine Independence, demonstrating a coarse disregard for the wishes of the Filipinos, who fought a terrible war against the Spanish to pursue that independence.

Despite the Filipino spirit of independence, Kipling rewrote "The White Man's Burden" to encourage Americans to keep and hold the Philippine Islands. Kipling's poem was an important piece of pro-war propaganda and was even admitted into the American Congress in an argument for support of the Philippine-American War. In the long run, despite the efforts of Filipino nationals, the Americans defeated the First Philippine Republic in 1902, three years after Kipling's poem. Over 200,000 Filipino non-combatants died during the war from sickness and hunger. The United States took over the Philippine Islands as a territory, a status not ended until the end of World War II, when the Philippines finally became independent.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the entire poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mikvj-BhtPE)
- "Rudyard Kipling, American Imperialist" — A book review from the New Republic focused on Kipling's controversial legacy and years in America. (https://newrepublic.com/article/154615/rudyard-kipling-american-years-imperialism-book-review)
- "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" — This 1901 essay by American satirist Mark Twain is a response to "The White Man's Burden" that pokes fun at the supposed selflessness of white imperialism. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/To_the_Person_Sitting_in_Darkness)
- Imperialism — An overview of imperialism from Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperialism)
- "The Black Man's Burden" — A response to Kipling's poem published in 1920 by Hubert H. Harrison, a writer and racial activist. The poem is powerful in its echoes of Kipling's language, but that language is turned back against the white colonizers, exposing the hypocrisy and greed of imperialistic ideology. (http://www.expo98.msu.edu/people/harrison.htm)

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