**"The White Man's Burden"**

**Summary**

The poem is subtitled "The United States and the Philippine Islands".

The speaker says to take up the White Man's burden, which is to send the best men abroad and your sons into exile to serve your captives. These "newly-caught" people are wild, angry, and both devilish and childish.

He repeats that you must take up this burden to be patient, to temper your terror and hold back your pride, to use simple and frank words, and to gain profit by others.

He repeats to take up the burden, which includes "the savage wars of peace". You are to fill mouths with food and end famine and get rid of sickness and disease. However, you must be careful to avoid, as your goal draws near, falling into sloth and folly and watching your hopes dissolve.

He repeats to take up the burden – not the work of Kings but of common men, toiling like serfs. You will mark ports and roads with both your living and your dead.

He repeats to take up the White Man's burden, which will include being blamed by those you protect and being hated by those you guard. The hosts will call out, asking why you brought them out of bondage toward the light.

He repeats to take up the White Man's burden and never attempt to do less. He warns you not to use Freedom as a cloak for weariness because everything you do or say will be watched and weighed by the "silent, sullen peoples" you are endeavoring to help.

He concludes by repeating to take up the White Man's burden and leave your childish days behind you. You must ignore light, unwarranted praise and seek the manhood that comes from many "thankless years" and "dear-bought wisdom".

**Analysis**

“The White Man’s Burden,” published in 1899 in *McClure’s* magazine, is one of Kipling’s most infamous poems. It has been lauded and reviled in equal measure and has come to stand as the major articulation of the Occident’s rapacious and all-encompassing imperialist ambitions in the Orient. The poem was initially composed for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee but Kipling decided to submit “Recessional” instead. Kipling, observing the events across the Atlantic in the Spanish-American War, sent this to then-governor of New York Theodore Roosevelt as a warning regarding the dangers of obtaining and sustaining an empire. Roosevelt would then forward the poem to his friend Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, commenting that it was “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion point of view.”

The poem is seven stanzas long with a traditional rhyme scheme. It exhorts the reader to take up the white man’s burden by sending the best of their country to dark, uncivilized places of the earth. There they should try to end famine and disease and serve their new captives - the native peoples. The poem smacks of cultural imperialism, with the superior English going into a country of “sullen” brutes and imposing their civilizing behaviors and institutions. There is, of course, a mentality of the Social Gospel idea of philanthropy, which said that the rich and powerful had an obligation to assist the impoverished and the sick. While not necessarily a bad idea, it was still underlain with assumptions about racial superiority and helped to further more nefarious ways of establishing hegemony.

The racism is quite manifest. The native, “captive peoples” are “sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child”. They are being brought toward the light, but act indignant and ungrateful toward those who want to better them. Of course this attitude is understandable to us today – why would colonial subjects avidly embrace the violent, debasing imperialist impulses of other nations? – but Kipling seems to marvel that these people would not jump up in thanks to their "civilizing" conquerors.

The racism and acclaim for imperialism cannot be ignored, but Kipling did not intend the poem to be viewed as unqualified support of the imperialist endeavor; in fact, a more careful reading will reveal that Kipling was offering warnings to those who sought to undertake such actions. He warns against allowing sloth and folly to take over; laziness and debauched behavior can quickly derail noble goals. He also cautions patience, and tries to make it clear that this work is difficult and burdensome – it is the “toil of serf and sweeper,” not the “tawdry rule of kings”. He tells them they will encounter resistance and hostility but must push through. Some of the most stirring lines are: “Take up the White Man's burden-- / Have done with childish days-- / The lightly proffered laurel, / The easy, ungrudged praise”. Those who worked in the colonies must grow up quickly and understand that they will work hard and perhaps not earn the frequent and unfettered praise they might have expected.

Despite its more nuanced message, the phrase “the white man’s burden” became a euphemism for imperialism. Criticism of the poem has endured. Parodies were written early; “The Brown Man’s Burden” by Henry Lambuchere and H.T. Johnson’s “The Black Man’s Burden” are two such examples, both written in 1899. The German-American political theorists/philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in her famous discussion of imperialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that “the fact that the ‘White Man’s burden is either hypocrisy or racism has not prevented a few of the best Englishmen from shouldering the burden in earnest and making themselves the tragic and quixotic fools of imperialism.”

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