Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The White Man's Burden

by Rudyard Kipling

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.6, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.4

Kipling published this poem in February 1899, just after the Spanish-American War, as the U.S. Senate debated annexing the Philippines; war with Filipino independence fighters began that same month. Addressed to Americans, it presents empire as a selfless duty and describes colonized peoples as "Half-devil and half-child." The phrase "white man's burden" quickly became shorthand for the racist justification of imperialism, and critics answered it with parodies. Read it as a historical argument to be examined, not as advice.

THE POEM

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 hope 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!) toward 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 judgment of your peers!

VOCABULARY

exile — forced absence from one's home country

harness — straps used to control a working animal

sullen — resentful and silent

tawdry — cheap and showy

serf — a laborer bound to work for a lord

bondage — slavery or captivity

proffered — offered

laurel — a symbol of honor or praise

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker addressing, and how does the refrain "Take up the White Man's burden" try to persuade them?

2. How does the poem describe the colonized peoples (for example "Half-devil and half-child" and "Sloth and heathen Folly")? What do these words reveal about the speaker's attitude?

3. The poem calls empire a sacrifice for others: "To seek another's profit, / And work another's gain." Who actually paid the costs and gained the profits of colonial rule? Whose voices are missing?

4. What does the speaker expect in return for the "burden" ("The blame of those ye better, / The hate of those ye guard")? How does this framing turn resistance into ingratitude?

5. Knowing the poem was published as the U.S. debated taking the Philippines, why do you think the phrase "white man's burden" became a target for critics and satirists?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a one-page response from the point of view of someone the poem calls "silent, sullen peoples," or write an analytical paragraph explaining how the poem uses the language of duty and sacrifice to justify conquest. Quote at least two lines.

The White Man's Burden — Answer Key

1. White American (and European) readers and leaders, especially Americans deciding on the Philippines. The repeated command frames empire as an obligation and a test of "manhood," making refusal sound cowardly.
2. They are pictured as wild, childlike, lazy and evil ("fluttered folk and wild", "new-caught, sullen peoples"). The language is racist and dehumanizing; it denies colonized people adult judgment so that ruling them seems justified.
3. Colonized people bore the violence, loss of land and self-rule; colonial powers and companies took the wealth. The poem silences the colonized; their only words are a scripted complaint ("Why brought ye us from bondage") that the speaker mocks. Accept supported answers.
4. Only "blame" and "hate", plus the respect of "your peers." Calling resistance hatred from those "ye guard" makes the colonizers seem like victims and dismisses real opposition to occupation.
5. The poem gave a plain, memorable name to the idea that conquest was charity, so opponents of imperialism (anti-imperialists, Filipino and Black American writers) could quote and parody it to expose the racism and self-interest behind it. Accept supported answers.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-white-mans-burden-rudyard-kipling/