

# *Art, Commentary and Evidence: Analysis of "The White Man's Burden"*

*In this activity students analyze Kipling's famous poem about imperialism and read several poems that were written in response to it. Students discuss how effective the poems are as art, political commentary, and historical evidence.*

## *Essential Questions/Objectives*

- Students will analyze the poem "The White Man's Burden" and poems written in response to it.
- What were the different arguments, for and against, United States imperialism?
- Students will weigh the strengths and weaknesses of several poems as works of art, political commentary and historical evidence.

## *Instructions*

1. **Step 1: Do Now:** Please locate the **worksheet** and **Kipling's "The White Man's Burden."** You should individually read the poem and answer the questions in Part I of the worksheet.
2. **Step 2:** In groups, please locate the essay **"'The White Man's Burden' and Its Critics"** and **pages 8-9 of the *Savage Acts* viewing guide.** Read the information in your groups and discuss how it enhances your understanding of the poem. The group should compose a response in Part II of the worksheet.
3. **Step 3:** Please locate the other poems. Kipling's contemporaries wrote dozens of parodies and critiques of "The White Man's Burden" and the imperial ideology it espoused. Four of those poems are listed in Part III of the worksheet. Each group should choose one of the poems from the list to investigate further. Make sure that at least one group analyzes each poem. As a group, read and answer the questions.
4. **Step 4:** We will reconvene as a whole class and a representative from each group to read a brief excerpt from the poem they read and share some of their findings with the whole class.
5. Discussion: How effective are the poems work as art, political commentary and/or historical commentary?

## *Historical Context*

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 hand, 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. John White's "The Black Man's Burden," Henry Lebouchère's "The Brown Man's Burden," and Howard S. Taylor's "The Poor Man's Burden" were three such parodies.

**Worksheet - Art, Commentary, and Evidence:  
Analysis of “The White Man’s Burden”**

**Part I:** Read the poem “The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling and answer the following questions.

1. How does Kipling portray the subjects of colonial rule? How does he portray their rulers?
  
2. Using your own words, explain what Kipling thought was the “White Man’s Burden.” Who, or what, was supposedly burdensome to the “white man”?
  
3. Why does Kipling suggest it is important for the “white man” to “take up” this burden?
  
4. Who do you think Kipling believed would read his poem? What do you think his audience might have said in response to it?
  
5. How has Kipling used language effectively—or not—to convey his ideas about the world? How and why would this poem have had a different kind of impact than an editorial or a speech? Is the poem effective as art? As political commentary?

**Part II:** Read the essay “‘The White Man’s Burden’ and Its Critics” by Jim Zwick and pages 8-9 (“The Culture of Empire”) from the *Savage Acts* viewing guide.

How does the historical information enhance your understanding of the poem?

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**Part III:** Select one of the following poems (circle your choice). Read the poem and answer the following questions.

The Real "White Man's Burden"

The "White Man's Burden": Uncle Sam to Kipling

The Black Man's Burden

The Brown Man's Burden

The Poor Man's Burden

1. What is the message of this poem? What attitude toward imperialism, if any, does the poem take? Cite specific words or phrases.
2. Who is the author more concerned about, the people ruled by whites or the white rulers?
3. What, if anything, is the author trying to say about U.S. society at the turn of the twentieth century?

# "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands"

*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.*

Take up the White Man's burden—  
Send forth the best ye breed—  
Go send 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—  
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) to the light:  
"Why brought ye us from bondage,  
Our loved Egyptian night?"  
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). From History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>  
**CREATOR** | Rudyard Kipling  
**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The White Man's Burden' and Its Critics"

*Jim Zwick is an American Studies scholar and author of [Confronting Imperialism: Essays on Mark Twain and the Anti-Imperialist League](#) and [Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire: Anti-Imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War](#), as well as numerous book chapters and journal and magazine articles about the Anti-Imperialist League and Mark Twain's anti-imperialist writings. Here he provides an overview of the concept of "the white man's burden" and the context in which Kipling's poem originated. He also discusses some of the many anti-imperialist parodies and responses that followed it.*

## "The White Man's Burden" and Its Critics

By Jim Zwick

Published in *McClure's Magazine* in February of 1899, Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," appeared at a critical moment in the debate about imperialism within the United States. The Philippine-American War began on February 4 and two days later the U.S. Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris that officially ended the Spanish-American War, ceded Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States, and placed Cuba under U.S. control. 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 euphemism for imperialism that seemed to justify the policy as a noble enterprise. Anti-imperialists quickly responded with parodies of the poem. They focused on the new warfare in the Philippines, the hypocrisy of claiming moral sanction for a policy they argued originated from greed for military power and commercial markets, continuing racial and gender inequality at home, and the special "burden" of imperialism to the working people of the United States. The poem was not quickly forgotten. In 1901, after two years of devastating warfare in the Philippines, Mark Twain remarked: "The White Man's Burden has been sung. Who will sing the Brown Man's?" In December of 1903, C. E. D. Phelps used a parody of the poem to criticize the U.S. acquisition of the Panama Canal Zone. The "white man's burden" concept was also revived in later discussions of U.S. interventions in the Americas and during World War I.

**SOURCE** | Jim Zwick, "The White Man's Burden and Its Critics," ND.

**CREATOR** | Jim Zwick

**ITEM TYPE** | Article/Essay

# "The Brown Man's Burden"

*Much like Lulu Baxter Guy's "The Black Man's Burden," Henry Labouchère's "The Brown Man's Burden" shifts the emphasis of Kipling's notorious poem, offering a view of imperialism from the perspective of those who were most directly affected by the expansionist policies of nations like Britain and the United States. "The Brown Man's Burden" offers an indictment of imperial hypocrisy, with particular emphasis on the violence employed in subjugating countries like the Philippines in the name of freedom.*

## The Brown Man's Burden

Pile on the brown man's burden

To gratify your greed;

Go, clear away the "niggers"

Who progress would impede;

Be very stern, for truly

'Tis useless to be mild

With new-caught, sullen peoples,

Half devil and half child.

Pile on the brown man's burden;

And, if ye rouse his hate,

Meet his old-fashioned reasons

With Maxims up to date.

With shells and dumdum bullets

A hundred times made plain

The brown man's loss must ever

Imply the white man's gain.

Pile on the brown man's burden,

compel him to be free;

Let all your manifestoes

Reek with philanthropy.

And if with heathen folly

He dares your will dispute,

Then, in the name of freedom,

Don't hesitate to shoot.

Pile on the brown man's burden,

And if his cry be sore,

That surely need not irk you--

Ye've driven slaves before.

Seize on his ports and pastures,

The fields his people tread;

Go make from them your living,

And mark them with his dead.

Pile on the brown man's burden,

And through the world proclaim

That ye are Freedom's agent--

There's no more paying game!

And, should your own past history

Straight in your teeth be thrown,

Retort that independence

Is good for whites alone.

**SOURCE** | Henry Labouchère, "The Brown Man's Burden," *Truth* (London); reprinted in *Literary Digest* 18, 25 February 1899.

**CREATOR** | Henry Labouchère

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The 'White Man's Burden': Uncle Sam to Kipling"

*"Droch" was the pen name of Robert Bridges, a critic and editor at Scribner's and Life magazines and a friend to both Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. In this response to Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," he opens by sarcastically thanking Kipling for "showing us the way," and goes on to explain why some Americans may not be enthusiastic about the prospect of an empire, making particular reference to the experience of the Civil War. While not as strongly anti-imperialist as other works of the time, Bridges nonetheless concludes that "We've got troubles of our own/Enough to keep us busy" without the imperial adventure in the Philippines and elsewhere.*

## The "White Man's Burden": Uncle Sam to Kipling

*"Take up the White Man's burden!  
Have done with childish days." -- R. K.*

Oh, thank you, Mr. Kipling,  
For showing us the way  
To buckle down to business  
And end our "childish day."  
We know we're young and frisky  
And haven't too much sense --  
At least, not in the measure  
We'll have a few years hence.  
Now, this same "White Man's burden"  
You're asking us to tote  
Is not so unfamiliar  
As you're inclined to note.  
We freed three million negroes,  
Their babies and their wives;  
It cost a billion dollars,  
And near a million lives!  
And while we were a-fighting  
In all those "thankless years"  
We did not get much helping --

Well, not from English "peers."  
And so -- with best intentions --  
We're not exactly wild  
To free the Filipino,  
"Half devil and half child."  
Then thank you, Mr. Kipling,  
Though not disposed to groan  
About the White Man's Burden,  
We've troubles of our own;  
Enough to keep us busy  
When English friends enquire,  
"Why don't you use your talons?"  
There are chestnuts in the fire!"

**SOURCE** | "Droch" (Robert Bridges), "The 'White Man's Burden': Uncle Sam to Kipling," *Life* 33, 16 February 1899.

**CREATOR** | Robert Bridges

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The Black Man's Burden"

*This poem by Lulu Baxter Guy turns the tables on Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," suggesting that the real "burden" was borne by African-Americans under the weight of racial oppression. Making an impassioned plea for racial equality, Guy implores readers to "think of the brave deeds [African-Americans] have done," such as those of the black soldiers who took part in the charge of San Juan Hill during the recent Spanish-American War.*

## **The Black Man's Burden**

Take off the black man's burden,  
This boon we humbly crave.  
Have we not served ye long enough?  
Been long enough your slave?  
Cut loose the bands that bind us,  
Bid us like men be strong.  
Think of the brave deeds we have done;  
Look not for all the wrong.

Take off the black man's burden,  
'Tis this that we demand;  
Think not of all the crimes you've heard  
But that march up San Juan.  
Oh, South, can't you remember  
When you fought to hold our lives?  
How loyal was the black man  
To your daughters and your wives?

Take off the black man's burden,  
Ye men of power and might.  
Wait not one for another  
But dare to do the right.  
The blood, the smoke, the ashes,  
Of martyred men that's slain;  
Comes wafted to you from the south  
But for another's gain.

Take off the black man's burden,  
His mind can then expand.  
He'll prove your equal in the race,  
Stand every whit a man.  
We'll wait till the burden's lifted,  
And to those who crush us down,  
Will come the words of God to Cain,  
"Thy brother's blood crieth from the ground."

**SOURCE** | Lulu Baxter Guy, "The Black Man's Burden," *Cleveland Journal*, 26 December 1903.

**CREATOR** | Lulu Baxter Guy

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The Real White Man's Burden"

*This satire of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" was written by Ernest Crosby, a pacifist and president of the Anti-Imperialist League of New York. Crosby's verses poke fun at Kipling's assumption that the "civilized" way of life is inherently superior, using irony to highlight the contrast between the industrialized world and "those benighted shores [where]/They have no cheerful iron-mills/Nor... department stores." Crosby also alludes to "the Maine," the ship whose sinking sparked the Spanish-American war, concluding with a scathing indictment of what he views as the imperialists' hypocrisy.*

## The Real "White Man's Burden"

Take up the White Man's burden;  
Send forth your sturdy sons,  
And load them down with whisky  
And Testaments and guns.  
Throw in a few diseases  
To spread in tropic climes,  
For there the healthy niggers  
Are quite behind the times.

And don't forget the factories.  
On those benighted shores  
They have no cheerful iron-mills  
Nor eke department stores.  
They never work twelve hours a day,  
And live in strange content,  
Altho they never have to pay  
A single cent of rent.

Take up the White Man's burden,  
And teach the Philippines  
What interest and taxes are  
And what a mortgage means.  
Give them electrocution chairs,  
And prisons, too, galore,  
And if they seem inclined to kick,  
Then spill their heathen gore.

They need our labor question, too,  
And politics and fraud,  
We've made a pretty mess at home;  
Let's make a mess abroad.  
And let us ever humbly pray  
The Lord of Hosts may deign  
To stir our feeble memories,  
Lest we forget -- the Maine.

Take up the White Man's burden;  
To you who thus succeed  
In civilizing savage hoards  
They owe a debt, indeed;  
Concessions, pensions, salaries,  
And privilege and right,  
With outstretched hands you raise to bless  
Grab everything in sight.

Take up the White Man's burden,  
And if you write in verse,  
Flatter your Nation's vices  
And strive to make them worse.  
Then learn that if with pious words  
You ornament each phrase,  
In a world of canting hypocrites  
This kind of business pays.

**SOURCE** | Ernest Crosby, "The Real White Man's Burden," *The New York Times*, 15 February 1899.

**CREATOR** | Ernest Crosby

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The Poor Man's Burden" (Excerpt)

*This poem was one of a number of parodies written in response to Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Here the author points out the special misery that imperialism abroad places on working people back home.*

Pile up the poor man's burden—  
The weight of foreign wars;  
Go shrewdly yoke together  
Great Mercury and Mars,  
And march with them to conquest,  
As once did ancient Rome,  
With vigor on her borders  
And slow decay at home!  
Pile up the poor man's burden,  
Accept Great Britain's plan;  
She does all things for commerce—  
Scarce anything for man.  
Far off among the pagans  
She seeks an open door  
While Pity cries in London,  
"God help the British poor!"

**SOURCE** | Howard S. Taylor, "The Poor Man's Burden," poem, in *The Public* 1, 18 February 1899.

**CREATOR** | Howard S. Taylor

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The Black Man's Burden" (Excerpt)

*Among the dozens of replies to Rudyard Kipling's pro-imperialist poem "The White Man's Burden," 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.*

Take up the black man's burden!  
Not his across the seas,  
But his who grows your cotton,  
And sets your heart at ease,  
When to the sodden rice fields  
Your children dare not go,  
Nor brave the heat that sings like  
The foundry's fiery glow.  
Take up the black man's burden!  
He helped to share your own  
On many a scene by battle-clouds  
Portentously o'erblown;  
On Wagner's awful parapet,  
As late where Shafter's plan  
Was for the boys to take the lead,  
He showed himself a man.

**SOURCE** | John White Chadwick, *Later Poems*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1905).

**CREATOR** | John White Chadwick

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry

# "The White Man's Burden" (Excerpt)

*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."*

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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.

**SOURCE** | Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899." *McClure's Magazine* 12 (February, 1899).

**CREATOR** | Rudyard Kipling

**ITEM TYPE** | Fiction/Poetry