

## THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

*Kipling was convinced that England's cultural and racial superiority predisposed it to conquer new lands and people. This ideology transpires in this poem, written in 1899, at a time when the Philippines were occupied by the United States. The call to "take up the white man's burden" is addressed to Americans as recent colonists. The poem portrays a white American colonist as a benefactor of humanity; he is rewarded with a rebellion, which is perceived as necessary evil.*

1 Take up the White Man's burden -  
2 Send forth the best ye breed -  
3 Go send your sons to exile  
4 To serve your captives' need;  
5 To wait in heavy harness,  
6 On fluttered folk and wild -  
7 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
8 Half-devil and half-child.  
(...)  
33 Take up the White Man's burden -  
34 And reap his old reward;  
35 The blame of those ye better,  
36 The hate of those ye guard -  
37 The cry of hosts ye humour  
38 (Ah, slowly!) toward the light:  
39 "Why brought ye us from bondage,  
40 Our loved Egyptian night?"

### Glossary

**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.

**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 =** in an unusual usage, "captives" means the peoples conquered by the Americans, rather than its usual meaning of "prisoners."

**heavy harness =** 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 the animal pulls. In this context, the white man is the draft animal, while the non-white peoples are the burden pulled behind.

**fluttered =** is an archaic form meaning moving irregularly or in an agitated fashion. Here it indicates the restlessness of the non-white peoples.

**sullen =** means silent. Here it suggests the conquered peoples will be non-responsive after their conquest.

### Summary

Line 1: 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

Lines 2-4: 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 captives.

Lines 5-7: the young white men will be harnessed like horses awaiting the call of an unreliable, nearly savage people, who have just been captured like prizes in a contest

Line 8: These same people are not human adults but both childlike and evil.

Line 33: The speaker again implores the white audience to perform this difficult task.

Line 34: The speaker lays out the supposed rewards of this imperial project, which are negative and thus only rewards in an ironic sense.

Lines 35-36: 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.

Line 37: The whites will be indulgent in a parental fashion toward the non-whites, who will cry out against their teachings.

Lines 38-40: 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.

### **Questions**

1. When and why was the poem composed?
2. List the main themes of the poem.
3. What does the poem reveal about the mentality of that time?