

More >



Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

“The White Man’s Burden”

by Samantha Christiansen

Date: 1899

Author: Rudyard Kipling

Genre: Poem

Summary Overview

“The White Man’s Burden” was written by the British author Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) in 1899 and published in *McClure’s Magazine* with the subtitle “The United States and the Philippine Islands.” Kipling wrote the poem in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War as a means to advocate for U.S. expansion into the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

While the piece was meant to influence U.S. policy, it clearly reflects Kipling’s own perspective on British imperialism, particularly in British India, where Kipling spent much of his childhood. He presents a classic rationale for empire as a necessary and noble intervention by the more “civilized” European white nations in other parts of the world. While much analysis has been done on the motivations for empire, Kipling’s poem remains a particularly bald expression of the white supremacist ideology behind colonialism. Some have speculated that the poem could have been written as a satire, but the pro-imperial perspective it presents is consistent with Kipling’s defense of imperialism throughout his life. In addition, the poem was not received as satire by popular audiences, and Kipling himself never gave an indication that it was intended in any way contrary to this popular reception.

The legacy of the poem has been significant. In response to the poem, several writers penned anti-imperial rebuttals, such as Henry Labouchère’s poem “The Brown Man’s Burden” (1899) and E. D. Morel’s “The Black Man’s Burden” (1903). In the years following the poem, the phrase “White Man’s Burden” has been used as a metaphor for cultural chauvinism and neo-colonialism, and it has been regularly used to critique policies of intervention by Western governments in Global South nations.

Defining Moment

The expansion of empire is hardly a nineteenth century phenomenon. Since men have adopted agriculture and city life, they have wanted to dominate other men as a sign of their own advancement. However, “imperialism”—that is, the idea that empire is a *necessary* stage of civilization, that men’s empires are a sign of their level of civilization—is very much a nineteenth century phenomenon. The combination of nationalism, industrialization, morality and economy became the necessary witches’ brew to produce an empire; status as a great power could only be achieved by taking colonies, the way nuclear weapons became the litmus test of power a hundred years later. Add the concept of Darwinism into the mix—that there was something biological in the notion of the occupation of empires, that the nation that was not evolving into an imperial power was instead degenerating—and the brew became intoxicating, and deadly.

No power had a bigger empire in the nineteenth century, in terms of total land mass and population, than the British Empire. Not surprisingly, no power was as fully developed in terms of nationalism and industrialization either, and morality and economy in the form of free market capitalism had been invented in Britain. Darwin himself was English. By Rudyard Kipling’s time, the British controlled India’s manufacturing and mining, managed diamond and gold mines in Cape Colony, controlled the Suez Canal and the Egyptian “condominium” that surrounded it, held naval bases in Malaysia and trade factories in Hong Kong, and had five settler colonies that ran their own governments, or dominions, in Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The British Empire was such a model of world power to other Europeans by the turn of the twentieth century that they copied it, occupying colonies all over the world in order to play catch-up and hope to get in on some of the riches and prestige that the British state received from its empire. The focus of expansion was Africa, which was almost entirely colonized in a mere 35 years, from 1875 to 1910, and to a lesser extent China’s ports, most of which were forced to accept domination by European merchants and the militaries behind them in the 1890s.

Amazingly, this was all true despite the fact that the empire was not exactly popular in Britain except for that short period of time at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century when Kipling wrote his works. For all the wealth the British economy got out of its empire, the burdens of administering to so many other lands cost the British taxpayer well more than they believed they got out of the colonies. The empire tended to make newspapers when something was wrong—an 1865 rebellion in Jamaica, the viceroy being assassinated in India in 1874, an army slaughtered by Zulus in 1877, General Charles George Gordon losing his head to Sudanese nationalists in 1885, the South African or Boer War from 1899 to 1902. To most Britons, empire was a headache, even though it seemed indefinitely important to actually have one.

The cartoonist William H. Walker ridicules the colonial hypocrisy inherent to “the white man’s burden”. (Life magazine)



THE WHITE (?) MAN'S BURDEN.

Ultimately, if they had to define it, most educated British subjects would likely argue that the empire was indeed a sign of their civilization, and a necessary one. The British nations (minus Ireland, which was really still a colony) were made up of peoples who defined themselves largely as Protestant, maritime, commercial and free. These values demanded that the British expand their power around the world, for their own good and everyone else's. Furthermore, despite the fact that millions died trying to keep British occupiers out of their lands and exploitation was the very purpose of imperialism, an educated Briton asked to define the purpose of empire would almost surely say it was for the betterment of the colonized peoples too. Empire was, as the French called it, “a civilizing mission,” and despite the hatred they elicited and the hypocrisies that they had to trample over, the British were out to make a better world, whether the world liked it or not.

It was in this context in 1898 that world newspapers carried stories of the Spanish-American War and the United States' foray into empire-building. The American army and navy occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. There was little controversy engendered in the first three islands but the Philippines had a well-established independence movement already in place when the US Navy arrived in Manila in 1898, and despite the cooperation of the rebels in driving out the Spanish, American forces simply replaced them as colonizers, leading to a long and violent insurgency that would last until 1902 and cost 9000 American casualties, and the

lives of 25 times as many Filipinos. It was this insurgency that inspired Kipling, already the poet laureate of the British Empire, to warn the United States—the original colonial rebel power—as to exactly what sort of a business they had gotten themselves into.

Author Biography

Joseph Rudyard Kipling was the most well-known British poet of his time, and for a while the most popular. He was born in 1865 in India, a colony to which he would always be sympathetic, and educated back home in England, an experience he hated. He spent time at a public school for the children of army officers and colonial officials, and there he began to write poems of such facility that his parents actually published many of them as a book when he was sixteen. At seventeen he returned to India to become a journalist, where his true literary career began to take shape.

As a journalist, Kipling made many friends and traveled all over south Asia, writing poems and occasionally publishing them. Gradually his talent was recognized, and his editors allowed him to produce short stories, travelogue and poems for his newspapers as opposed to actual news articles. His travelogues would eventually be collected in his book *From Sea to Sea* (1900). His short stories, most about British officers in India, were collected in *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888), his first commercial success. After published further short stories in newspapers, Kipling left India for England in 1889.

In England, the young Kipling became acquainted with other writers about imperial subjects like H. Rider Haggard, and writers about English social life like Thomas Hardy. But he was mostly a loner, and if he was interested in companionship, he preferred army officers and other people he perceived as adventurous. Not surprisingly, he saw the empire itself as an adventure of sorts, acquired by heroes and maintained by moral pillars. He was also sympathetic to the peoples of the empire, too, however, and he had a vivid imagination, best displayed perhaps in *The Jungle Book* (1894) or *Kim* (1901), both becoming popular children's books too. Yet he was best known as the poet of empire, particularly of British India. Kipling was motivated by the fact that so few of the British people actually knew anything whatsoever about the empire, and he determined to entertain them into a level of understanding. Particularly striking in his work was his sense of fate as a determining factor in people's lives and works, the personification of animals as archetypal human personalities, and the occasional touch of the supernatural and weird, perhaps a nod to his rudimentary understanding of India's many religions.

In 1892, Kipling married an American woman and moved to Vermont, where his work thrived and he contrived to meet Americans he admired, like Theodore Roosevelt, for whom he wrote "The White Man's Burden." Perhaps not coincidentally, Roosevelt was the United States' most convincing version of an imperialist, a hero of the Spanish-American War later on. He bounced back and forth between England and America for a time before taking ill and moving to South Africa for the warm climate. There, he had a first-hand view of the Boer War (1899-1902) and made the acquaintance of the men who ran Cape Colony and the war effort, including Alfred Milner and Cecil Rhodes. The British army was woefully unprepared to fight the South African Afrikaaner population, and the shock of their early failures in the field led Kipling to push for military preparedness and sacrifice in the name of the empire for the rest of his life. His works were never as popular as in this period, but he also became more strident politically and began to alienate readers.

Kipling returned to England permanently in 1908. A year earlier, he won the Nobel Prize for literature, which cemented his status as the embodiment of empire. His causes tended to be reactionary; he supported Protestant rebellion in Ireland and was positively excited with the coming of the Great War. Then his only son, John, went missing at the battle of Loos in 1915, an experience that devastated him—John's body was never found in Rudyard Kipling's lifetime. He became embittered due to his inability to find his son, contracting an ulcer that gave him regular gastrointestinal difficulties. He also published dark poems reflecting his sense of loss. In 1917, he was contracted by the Imperial War Graves Commission to write inscriptions for its memorials and epitaphs for soldiers. His production tailed off in the last twenty years of his life, and he died in 1936.

Historical Document

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 mark 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 he 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 cloke 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!

Document Analysis

"The White Man's Burden" is significant in its depiction of both the colonized and the colonizer. The poem is addressed to a colonizing nation. In the first stanza, Kipling calls on his audience to "Take up the White Man's burden— / Send forth the best ye breed— / Go bind your sons to exile." He thus frames the colonizing nation as one making a great sacrifice and the colonial troops as being the best of the nation, being sent "to serve your captives' need." He depicts the colonizer as a servant to the colonized people, which he describes as ungrateful "sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child."

Indeed, the image of a half-devil and half-child creates a dual personality for those who are colonized, and it serves to justify different aspects of imperialism. The half-child portrayal establishes a need for a more knowledgeable colonizer to teach the innocent and ignorant colonized about life and civilization. This patronizing view of the colonized consigns all indigenous knowledge to the less advanced and less developed. At the same time, the half-

devil depiction reflects a fundamental mistrust of the colonized and relegates all resistance to their inherent savagery and moral inferiority—justifying military tactics and often brutal systems of control and separation between the colonizer and colonized.

The themes of colonialism as a burden and of a self-sacrificing colonial official continue throughout the poem. The tone becomes increasingly bitter, as when Kipling complains in the third stanza that after all the colonizers' hard work to "Fill full the mouth of Famine / And bid the sickness cease," they must "Watch sloth and heathen Folly / Bring all your hopes to nought." The resentment Kipling holds toward the ungrateful colonized people is best seen in the fifth stanza of the poem. Here Kipling describes the "reward" as "The blame of those ye better / The hate of those ye guard." Native resistance to colonialism is deemed ignorant and devoid of political understanding.

In response to any resistance, Kipling points out that the colonizer is obligated to maintain his honor and composure. The sixth stanza of the poem characterizes the duty of the colonizer to be a constant representative of the West. Despite weariness, Kipling forewarns the young colonizer, "By all ye cry or whisper / By all ye leave or do / The silent, sullen peoples / Shall weigh your gods and you." Thus, Kipling adds another level of burden on the colonizer, who is constantly representing civilization to the natives.

In the final stanza of the poem, Kipling makes a case for imperialism as part of growing into manhood. The individual in this case serves to represent national maturation as well, and in the final line Kipling presents the true reward, in his eyes, of imperialism: "The judgment of your peers." In this way, Kipling argues that even if the colonized people do not appreciate the sacrifices of the colonizer, the rest of the "civilized" world will.

In the final analysis, "White Man's Burden" treats colonialism as a purely humanitarian effort on the part of the colonizer. Kipling's imperialism is devoid of any taint of economic or political gain for the imperial powers. There is also no mention of suffering of the colonized people under the abuses of colonialism—only the suffering that colonialism seeks to alleviate.

Essential Themes

The point at which Kipling published "The White Man's Burden" was actually the high watermark for imperialism in both Britain and the United States. The insurgency in the Philippines did little to stem enthusiasm for American efforts at nation-building; from Central America and the Caribbean all the way to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has taken on the "burden" of bettering peoples around the world at the end of a gun, never an optimal way to create democracy or flourishing capitalist economies. The idea of actually colonizing those places, however, disappeared after the Spanish-American war, much as it did for Britain after the Boer War at the same time. Colonization seemed to fall out of fashion as fears ratcheted up about a general European war coming in the early twentieth century.

The war would cost Britain's poet of imperialism his son; it also cost Britain the similar assuredness with which its empire was conducted. Though the British Empire picked up valuable oil fields in southwest Asia with the conclusion of the war, its global hegemony was mortally damaged; Britain could not win the war without the help of its empire, and the slaughter entailed wounded the goodwill that Britain had accumulated and that Kipling's "white man's burden" claimed the British looked to foster overseas. The Philippines would become independent in 1946, after the Second World War; most of Britain's colonies would follow soon after.

Bibliography and Further Reading

- 1 Brendon, Piers. *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- 2 Gilmour, David. *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- 3 Judd, Denis. *Diamonds are Forever? Kipling's Imperialism*. New York : Longman, 1998.
- 4 Karnow, Stanley. *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.
- 5 Kinzer, Stephen. *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire*. New York: Henry Holt, 2016.
- 6 Morris, Jan. *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- 7 Musicant, Ivan. *Empire by Default: The Spanish-American War and the Dawn of the*

Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Christiansen, Samantha. "The White Man's Burden." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> , edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	Christiansen, Samantha. (2017). "The White Man's Burden". In E. Salem Press (Ed.), <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from https://online.salempress.com
CHICAGO Style	Christiansen, Samantha. "The White Man's Burden." <i>Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. https://online.salempress.com .