

The White Man's Burden

Rudyard Kipling (1899)

Born in British India in 1865, Rudyard Kipling was educated in England before returning to India in 1882, where his father was a museum director and authority on Indian arts and crafts. Thus Kipling was thoroughly immersed in Indian culture: by 1890 he had published in English about 80 stories and ballads previously unknown outside India. As a result of financial misfortune, from 1892-96 he and his wife, the daughter of an American publisher, lived in Vermont, where he wrote the two Jungle Books. After returning to England, he published "The White Man's Burden" in 1899, an appeal to the United States to assume the task of developing the Philippines, recently won in the Spanish-American War. As a writer, Kipling perhaps lived too long: by the time of his death in 1936, he had come to be reviled as the poet of British imperialism, though being regarded as a beloved children's book author. Today he might yet gain appreciation as a transmitter of Indian culture to the West.

What is it today's reader finds so repugnant (distasteful, objectionable) about Kipling's poem? If you were a citizen of a colonized territory, how would you respond to Kipling?



The White Man's Burden

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 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 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!

Notes:

Cloke = Cloak or a cover.

Laurel = since the days of Classical Greece, a laurel wreath has been a symbolic victory prize.