

**BRITISH IMPERIALISM -
RUDYARD KIPLING: THE
WHITE MAN'S BURDEN**



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Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, including a reading of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why the poem was written, what Kipling meant by the "burden", and how the work came to symbolize the Age of European Imperialism in the decades before the Great War.

Subjects

English / Language Arts, European History, World History, World Geography

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

180 minutes (2 x 90min)

Tour Links

- Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey
- Windsor Castle
- Bateman's House, East Sussex

Essential Questions

- Who was Rudyard Kipling?
- Why is he sometimes called the "defender of imperialism"?
- In Kipling's famous poem *The White Man's Burden*, what was the "burden"?

Academic Summary

Primary Source

The White Man's Burden (1899) **by Rudyard Kipling**

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!

Secondary Summary

In today's world of the 21st century, the ideas of imperialism and colonization seem abhorrent to most westerners, but a century ago, Europe controlled most of the world,

and Britain's empire was the largest. As a naval superpower going back to the days of wooden ships, Britain was able to carve out a vast overseas empire by 1900. Living on an island with limited natural resources and an ever-growing population, the British had colonized different parts of the globe beginning in the 16th century. Under the prevailing economic of that early period, colonies in North America and India would provide important natural resources like timber, tea and pitch, while at the same time these areas would also provide a market for finished goods made in the United Kingdom. The basic philosophy behind British colonization did not change after Britain lost its most important North American colonies to independence in 1783, it just shifted focus towards other areas around the world. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many British businessmen and politicians were focused on Africa, not for its people (slaves) as in centuries past, but rather for its natural resources, many of which were critical to the Industrial Revolution. Promises and dreams of rubber, oil, coal and other resources drove late 19th century European explorers and politicians wild with visions of untold wealth. If they could bring civilization, Christianity and cleanliness to the "dark" continent, so much the better, as then average citizens and voters would approve and pay for such measures.

In 1884, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck invited most of the European nations to send representatives to his residence in Berlin for a conference to hammer out on paper their issues with Africa before they settled them with weapons. The conference took almost a year, issuing its report in Nov 1885. In the end, the Scramble for Africa worked, at least temporarily. Peace held in Europe for 30 additional years.

Unintentionally, the Berlin Conference of 1884 left a legacy that Africa nations have had to deal with into the 21st century. Modern African boundaries, often cutting across linguistic and tribal lines, were drawn by the Europeans in Berlin, and these boundaries have sometimes led to civil wars and genocide since independence.

Rudyard Kipling, a British poet and author, wrote a series of essays and poems in support of imperialism (including *The Jungle Book*, 1894). Perhaps his most famous work is also his shortest, a mere seven stanzas, and also one of his most criticized. Called *The White Man's Burden*, it was written in 1899 in response to America's victory in the Spanish-American War and the subsequent acquisition of the Philippine Islands, but the poem also came to symbolize the voice of imperialist sentiments across Britain and the western world. The message was fairly simple. Imperialism was not about natural resources, but rather about bringing civilization to the backwards masses of the world. European and Western languages, religions, engineering techniques and even cleanliness were to be given freely to the ignorant backwards non-whites. As Kipling put it, the "burden" of bringing civilization to the masses was a difficult task, but it was one that would be rewarded by God. Kipling, after all, was a product of an age when ideas behind social Darwinism often brought with them extreme racism.

Kipling's poem came to be seen as symbolic of the Imperialist Age. In response to its publication, religious missionaries flooded into the dark corners of the globe, determined to spread Christianity at all costs. New schools were built. Western languages were taught. European modes and styles of dress were introduced. The title even became a slogan for Pears' Soap, a British soap company, imploring the world to bring cleanliness to the "dirty" Africans. "Civilization" advanced... or did it? What about the local cultures

already in place when the Europeans arrived? What about the “burden” faced by Africans having to deal with white Europeans?

It should be pointed out that African colonists supplied vast amounts of natural resources such as rubber, gold, diamonds and oil to their European “masters.”

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, including a reading of Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem *The White Man’s Burden* (1899), students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why the poem was written, what Kipling meant by the “burden”, and how the work came to symbolize the Age of European Imperialism in the decades before the Great War.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the meaning of Rudyard Kipling’s poem *The White Man’s Burden*.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain under what circumstances the poem was written.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the poem came to symbolize the Age of European Imperialism in the decades before the Great War.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What were the ideas behind “Social Darwinism”? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – *The White Man’s Burden* and European Imperialism (20 min)
- Video – British Imperialism (5 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Rudyard Kipling and *The White Man’s Burden*, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework.
- Group Activity – Discussion on Rudyard Kipling’s poem *The White Man’s Burden* and European Imperialism in Africa and Asia (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Using specific examples from the text, explain in detail Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem *The White Man’s Burden* (1899), why the poem was written, what Kipling meant by the “burden”, and how the work came to symbolize the Age of European Imperialism in the decades before the Great War.

Extension

On tour: Westminster Abbey (Poet's Corner)

While on tour, you will visit Westminster Abbey. In the South Transept, students will see a section called "Poet's Corner", so named due to the large number of literary figures buried and commemorated there. Some, like Geoffrey Chaucer (1400) and Charles Dickens (1870) are actually buried in the Chapel, while others, such as Shakespeare and Longfellow, merely have memorials in Poet's Corner. Rudyard Kipling died in Jan 1936 and his ashes were buried in Poet's Corner. His grave is next to that of Charles Dickens.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/Kipling.asp
Rudyard Kipling, The White Man's Burden, 1899 (primary source) – from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/kipling_rudyard.shtml
Rudyard Kipling (website) – from the BBC
- <http://blogs.jefftwp.org/wordpress/dpapa/files/2013/09/African-Imperialism-Worksheets.pdf>
The European Scramble for Africa (academic worksheets) – from Daniel Papa, social studies teacher at Jefferson Township High School (NJ)
- www.fresno.k12.ca.us/divdept/sscience/history/imperialism_colonialism.htm
Imperialism and Colonialism (website) – from the Fresno Unified School District (CA)
- www.lbsdk12.com/cms/lib03/MS01910416/Centricity/Domain/118/Unit%203%20MotivationsforImperialism.ppt
Imperialism (PowerPoint) – from Long Beach School District (CA)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJe1W_HIWmA
European Imperialism in Africa (video) – from Discovery Education, this 5-minute video does a good job of explaining the basics behind imperialism, and is therefore appropriate for all classes.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFbZ-uss_VE
British Imperialism (video) – this 50-minute video is probably too long for most in-class showings, but is highly recommended for all AP and Advanced students and classes.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling
Rudyard Kipling – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_White_Man's_Burden
The White Man's Burden – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire
British Empire – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/bismarck-berlin-conference-1884
Imperial Germany (1871-1918) – Otto von Bismarck: Berlin Conference of 1884

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/british-colonization-white-mans-burden
British Imperialism – Rudyard Kipling: The White Man’s Burden

Key Terms

- Imperialism
- Rudyard Kipling
- Scramble for Africa
- Social Darwinism
- *The White Man’s Burden*

