Summary

In the famous poem, “White Man’s Burden,” the author is suggesting that Imperialism is a very good endeavor the United States should have. Author Rudyard Kipling says: “Take up the White Man’s burden” and “To serve your captives’ need.” These quotes show that Kipling thinks the United States should help the Philippines by serving their “need.” He also tells the White Man to “be done with childish days,” meaning that the United States must civilize the Philippines.

Speaker/Tone

The poem is written by Rudyard Kipling, who was a well-known author around the turn of the century. He was a pro-Imperialist writer and a prestigious college graduate who had won many awards, including the Nobel Prize for writing. This tells us, the readers, that he is a very credible writer. Knowing he is pro-Imperialist is perhaps the greatest piece for understanding the poem because without knowing his stance on Imperialism, we may think that he is criticizing the United States. His tone, however, is not critical, it is encouraging. While it may be written sarcastically, the message is to imperialize, therefore he is encouraging Theodore Roosevelt, the president of the United States to imperialize because it looks good to the other SuperPower nations.

Audience/Purpose

One of the people reading the poem would have been Teddy Roosevelt. Before he became politically active he was anti-Imperialist, which means he wanted to to keep the United States’ business in the United States. He became pro-Imperialist after he took his first office as a Senator. There could have been many reasons for his shift in stance on imperialism, but it could have been because imperialism was rampant around the turn of the century. Anyone who wanted to hold an office needed to hold a particular stance on imperialism. Those who didn’t agree with imperialism may not have been voted in office. Since Kipling wrote about imperialism and one of his main intended audiences was Teddy Roosevelt, another pro-Imperialist, we know that Kipling wrote the poem to tell Roosevelt that imperialism is good for the imperializing country and that the “rewards” of imperialism are worth little consideration when deciding to imperialize or not, especially during the time Kipling wrote the poem.

Occasion/Subject

There are two important pieces to look at when dealing with the occasion, or time period in which “White Man’s Burden” was written. The larger occasion is the environment or general feeling at this time, which was that imperialism was a great way to make a country prosperous while “helping” another country to be more like the imperializing one. The smaller occasion is the actual event that led the author to create a piece, which was the United States’ imperialization of the Philippines. We know that Kipling was talking about the Philippines because that happened in 1898 and the poem was written in 1899. Basically, the United States, a “civilized” country, is acting as world superpower like Britain and the Soviet Union (at the time), and trying to imperialize over the globe. The “White Man’s Burden” was a way for Kipling to iconicize the events occurring all over the globe.