The Black Man's Burden

POEM TEXT

Pile on the Black Man’s Burden,
'Tis nearest at your door;
Why heed long bleeding Cuba
Or dark Hawaii’s shore?
Halt ye your fearless armies
Which menace feeble folks,
Who fight with clubs and arrows
And brook your rifles' smoke.

Pile on the Black Man’s Burden,
His wail with laughter drown,
You’ve sealed the Red Man’s problem
And will take up the Brown.
In vain ye seek to end it
With bullets, blood or death—
Better by far defend it
With honor’s holy breath.

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
His back is broad though sore;
What though the weight oppress him,
He's borne the like before.
Your Jim-crow laws and customs,
And fiendish midnight deed,
Though winked at by the nation,
Will some day trouble breed.

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
At length 'twill heaven pierce;
Then on you or your children
Will reign God's judgments fierce.
Your battleships and armies
May weaker ones appall,
But God Almighty's justice
They'll not disturb at all.

SUMMARY

The speaker begins by sarcastically suggesting that the U.S. go ahead and add to the racism and oppression that Black people already face, an issue that is actually most apparent within the country itself rather than abroad. Indeed, since this problem is still so alive right here in the U.S., the speaker wonders why the country would bother turning its attention to suffering nations like Cuba or faraway places like Hawaii. The speaker urges U.S. leaders to stop military forces abroad, which are accustomed to bullying and oppressing disenfranchised people who are only capable of defending themselves using basic weapons that are no match for the U.S.'s heavy artillery.

The speaker once again sarcastically suggests that the U.S. add to the oppression of Black people, telling U.S. leaders in a tongue-in-cheek way to block out the sound of Black people's suffering with unconcerned laughter. What's more, the speaker indicates that the country might as well continue to oppress other nonwhite people as a way of *helping* them, sarcastically saying that the nation has already "helped" the Native Americans from whom it stole land. And now, the speaker says, the nation wants to "help" other people of color in the same way: by oppressing them and dominating their land. The speaker says that attempts to end the supposed suffering faced by nonwhite peoples through violence and bloodshed are pointless. The speaker continues that the U.S. is better off "helping" such people with honor and compassion.

Once again, the speaker sarcastically urges the U.S. to add to the oppression of Black people, this time noting that Black people are strong and resilient even though it's painful to endure so much hate and racism. Even though the weight of this racism puts an enormous strain on Black people, the speaker says, Black Americans are used to this kind of hardship and have become very resilient. With this in mind, the speaker references racist segregation policies (known as Jim Crow laws) before going on to hint at the terrible history of enslavers raping the Black people they enslaved—a practice that the nation as a whole never fully acknowledges even though everybody knows this took place frequently during the time of slavery. All of this, the speaker asserts, will someday create trouble for the powerful white people who rule the nation.

The speaker then repeats the sarcastic suggestion that the U.S. should add to the oppression of Black people. The speaker metaphorically suggests that racism and oppression will pile up on the backs of Black people and that this pile will someday become so high that it reaches heaven, at which point the powerful white racists and their loved ones will have to face the wrath of God. And although these racists are normally able to use militaristic force to dominate vulnerable populations, God's ability to punish bigots for their racist and oppressive behavior cannot be stopped by anything.

THEMES

RACISM AND IMPERIALISM

"The Black Man's Burden" is a response to an 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling called "The White Man's Burden," which argued that it was white people's moral responsibility to force a so-called *civilized* lifestyle upon nonwhite populations. Kipling's poem was ultimately based on the racist, ignorant belief that nonwhite people need to be saved from themselves. Kipling, unfortunately, wasn't alone in this thinking; at the end of the 19th century, many people believed the United States should assert its influence abroad by conquering certain nonwhite countries.

The speaker of "The Black Man's Burden" sarcastically suggests that the country shouldn't bother doing this when it could instead simply continue to oppress its own Black citizens. This tongue-in-cheek suggestion highlights the fact that the United States has *already* oppressed its fair share of nonwhite people. This, in turn, means that any new expansion of power will only add to the country's history of racist governing—a history that has placed a great "burden" (or strain) on Black people in America.

Within this framework, the "The Black Man's Burden" invites readers to consider the fact that the last thing the United States needs is a *new* population to oppress. After all, the country has already massacred and subjugated Native American people, in addition to having enslaved, tortured, and persecuted Black people.

To that end, the speaker points out that the subjection of Black people is "nearest at [the country's] door"—meaning that it is the most immediate example of the country's racist mindset, which is ultimately what fuels the imperialist desire to dominate nonwhite countries (imperialism, simply put, is the policy of overtaking another country with diplomatic or militaristic force).

When it comes down to it, the poem argues that the mere idea that imperialism is a "burden" for white people is problematic because it attempts to legitimize oppression. If white governments see domination as some kind of moral responsibility, it's easier for them to justify the blatantly racist act of taking over nonwhite nations and subjugating their citizens. This is why the speaker assumes such a sarcastic tone when talking about how the United States has supposedly helped Black people and Native Americans, since it's widely known that the country has done terrible things to both groups.

In keeping with this, the poem implicitly asks the following question: if the United States exerts influence over nonwhite people to supposedly *help* them, then why are Black people still suffering so much in the United States? The answer, of course, is that this exertion of power isn't, in the end, intended to help anyone but the self-serving white people who are unwilling to admit their own racism. And it is the struggle of dealing with this self-congratulatory form of racism that is, the poem implies, "the Black man's burden."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

RELIGION AND JUSTICE

The speaker turns to religion to suggest that there will be consequences for people who oppress Black Americans and other nonwhite populations. Although people of color might not be able to defend themselves from the tyrannical power of the U.S., the speaker contends that God will eventually bring judgment down upon racists. In turn, the speaker upholds that people who misuse their power will ultimately suffer as a result of their immoral behavior.

The speaker makes it clear that Black and other nonwhite people are often forced to endure racism without being able to defend themselves. To illustrate this imbalance of power, the speaker notes that the U.S. is all too eager to "menace feeble folks" with heavy weaponry that far outmatches anything these people could possibly defend themselves against. Furthermore, the speaker references the fact that Black Americans have suffered the weight oppression for generations. In both cases, readers are invited to consider the extent to which the country mistreats disenfranchised people without worrying about retaliation.

This, however, doesn't mean that such despicable treatment will go unpunished forever. Rather, the speaker asserts that God will someday smite racists, saying that even the most powerful "battleships and armies" won't stand a chance against the wrath of "God Almighty's justice."

In this way, the speaker uses religious faith to argue that there will be serious consequences for people who practice immoral—which is to say racist and tyrannical—behavior. Accordingly, if the U.S. continues to add to the "Black Man's Burden" by subjugating other nonwhite populations, the country's racist leaders will eventually discover that they aren't quite as powerful or unstoppable as they'd like to think.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,

'Tis nearest at your door;

The speaker begins with a somewhat ambiguous opening phrase: "Pile on the Black Man's Burden." This is an abrupt way to start the poem, especially since the line is end-stopped, giving it a terse, declarative sound. Because this line sounds so decisive, it almost functions like a thesis statement of sorts, one that tells readers to *add* to the hardships that Black people already face in the U.S.

As the poem progresses, it will become increasingly clear that the speaker is actually addressing the powerful white leaders of the U.S., ultimately doing this as a way of highlighting the racism that lies behind certain ways of governing. At this point, however, it's not yet clear why, exactly, the speaker wants to "pile on" the hardships of Black people.

Nevertheless, the speaker continues in line 2 to point out that the oppression of Black people is the "nearest" problem, meaning that it is quite immediate because it's a constant, everyday issue in the U.S. In this way, the speaker begins the poem by calling attention to the fact that Black people in the U.S. are forced to deal with racism and intense hardship. The speaker implies that this is something that the country (or the government, rather) takes for granted and even overlooks, which is why the speaker argues throughout the poem that any new acts of oppression will simply add to the country's ongoing history of racism. In other words, the nation's racist white leaders don't need to look far to find deep-seated issues of racism and turmoil, since these issues exist in a major way in the U.S.

The phrase "the Black Man's Burden" is an allusion to a poem by Rudyard Kipling called "The White Man's Burden." In this poem, Kipling makes the racist argument that the U.S. should embrace imperialism, which is the policy of conquering other nations using diplomatic or militaristic force—a policy historically enacted by powerful white governments to oppress nonwhite populations. Kipling's poem maintains that the U.S. has a moral duty to introduce a so-called *civilized* lifestyle to nonwhite people. More specifically, Kipling wanted the U.S. to colonize the Philippines, a viewpoint connected to the onset of the American-Philippine War of 1899.

By using the phrase "the Black man's burden," the speaker of this poem makes a pointed reference to Kipling's problematic argument, essentially suggesting in an ironic, sarcastic way that the country might as well take its racist, imperialist foreign policies and add them to the oppression of Black people in America.

These first two lines also establish the poem's use of iambic trimeter. A line of iambic trimeter includes three iambs, which are metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. However, the odd-numbered lines (which are also the non-rhyming lines) include feminine endings, which means they have an extra unstressed syllable that comes after the final stressed syllable. As such, the first two lines look like this:

Pile on the Black Man's Burden.
'Tis nearest at your door;

This meter perfectly matches the meter found in Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," providing readers with yet another indication that this poem is a direct response to Kipling's.

LINES 3-4

Why heed long bleeding Cuba
Or dark Hawaii's shore?

In these lines, the speaker poses a rhetorical question by asking why the U.S. would spend time paying attention to other places like Cuba or Hawaii. The implication here is that the nation sees these as places where it should assert its influence.

The reason this functions as a rhetorical question is that the speaker isn't *actually* asking why the country would do this. Rather, the speaker is using this question to make a persuasive point, essentially calling attention to the fact that the country doesn't need to look very far to find problems of oppression and racism. After all, the "Black Man's Burden" is the country's "nearest," most immediate issue, so why "pile on" to this problem by going abroad to subjugating still more nonwhite populations?

The phrase "long bleeding Cuba" in line 3 suggests that Cuba has been suffering for a long time. By bringing Cuba up in the first place, the speaker alludes to the U.S. invasion of Cuba in 1898 while also implying that the country did this under the pretenses of helping Cuba's suffering citizens. In reality, though, the U.S. invaded Cuba for political reasons and to establish power in the region. Given the sarcastic, ironic tone of this poem, it's clear that the speaker doesn't actually think the U.S.'s desire to "help" is genuine. Rather, the nation is merely interested in asserting dominance over yet another vulnerable group of people.

These lines feature the assonant /ee/ sound, which repeats three times:

Why heed long bleeding Cuba
Or dark Hawaii's shore?

This use of assonance connects the words "heed," "bleeding," and "Hawaii," giving the lines a cohesive sound. Furthermore, the word "shore" at the end of line 4 rhymes with the word "door" at the end of line 3, thereby establishing the poem's rhyme scheme, in which every other line (the even-numbered lines) rhyme with each other.

LINES 5-8

Halt ye your fearless armies

Which menace feeble folks,
Who fight with clubs and arrows
And brook your rifles' smoke.

In this moment, the language of the poem becomes more direct. Instead of sarcastically urging the U.S. to add to its robust history of racist behavior, the speaker now tells the government to stop its armies from bullying and oppressing vulnerable or disenfranchised people.

To illustrate the imbalance of power between the U.S. and the nonwhite populations it subjugates, the speaker focuses on the seemingly unmatchable strength of the American military. The speaker points out that the U.S. "menace[s] feeble folks" who have no choice but to fight back with weapons like "clubs and arrows," which are obviously no match for the U.S.'s intense and advanced weaponry.

By calling attention to this dynamic, the speaker presents the U.S. government as tyrannical and unrelenting while also making it hard to imagine that the country's domineering ways are truly intended to help the people it treats so violently.

These lines are also filled with consonance and alliteration:

Halt ye your fearless armies
Which menace feeble folks,
Who fight with clubs and arrows
And brook your rifles' smoke.

The alliteration of the /f/ sound is especially noticeable in this section, highlighting and connecting the words "fearless," "feeble," "folks," and "fight." This creates a soft, gentle sound that contrasts with the subject, which is about violence and destruction. What's more, this soft sound combines with the sibilance that can be found in these lines, as the speaker repeats not just the /s/ sound, but also the /th/ and /z/ sounds (which people often count as sibilance):

Halt ye your fearless armies
Which menace feeble folks,
Who fight with clubs and arrows
And brook your rifles' smoke

These sibilant sounds effectively soften the otherwise blunt sound of the other consonance in this section. On the whole, then, these lines sound balanced and measured, even though the speaker is harshly describing the U.S. government's unconscionable violence.

LINES 9-12

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
His wail with laughter drown,
You've sealed the Red Man's problem
And will take up the Brown.

The speaker begins the second stanza by repeating what seems to have become the poem's refrain: "Pile on the Black Man's Burden." Going on, the speaker once again uses an ironic tone to encourage the U.S. government to pay no attention to the suffering of Black Americans, suggesting that the powerful leaders should "drown" the sounds of this suffering out with unbothered laughter.

The speaker also sarcastically says that the U.S. government has "sealed the Red Man's problem." The term "Red Man" is now considered an offensive racial slur for Native American people. It's likely that the speaker is using the term it to illustrate and mock the way racist white people talk about Native Americans. More importantly, the idea that the U.S. has *helped* Native Americans is absurd, considering that the U.S. government murdered and stole from Native Americans and continues to oppress and marginalize Native American communities. If it wasn't already clear that the speaker is being sarcastic, then it certainly becomes clear when the speaker suggests that the U.S. has solved all the Native American community's "problem[s]."

With this in mind, the speaker acknowledges that the country wants to move on from supposedly "helping" Native Americans to "helping" Brown people. This is yet another allusion to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" and its goal of convincing U.S. leaders to colonize the Philippine islands. By bringing this up right after subtly reminding readers of how badly the U.S. has harmed the Native American community, the speaker implies that invading the Philippines would only be another disaster that would do little more than oppress yet another group of people.

All in all, the speaker's ironic suggestion that the U.S. help vulnerable communities of color solve their problems underhandedly illustrates that the imperialist idea of saving people of color from themselves is nothing but a self-serving form of racism, one that ultimately gives power-hungry white leaders an excuse to subjugate entire populations under the pretense of kindness and benevolence.

The alliteration that appears in line 9 is quite noticeable, as the speaker repeats the /b/ sound in the phrase "Black Man's Burden." There is also clear consonance of /l/ and /n/ sounds:

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
His wail with laughter drown,
You've sealed the Red Man's problem
And will take up the Brown.

This combination of alliteration and consonance gives these lines a strong, blunt sound.

LINES 13-16

In vain ye seek to end it
With bullets, blood or death—
Better by far defend it

With honor's holy breath.

The "it" in these lines refers to the "problem[s]" the U.S. government claims to want to help put an end to for communities of color. In other words, the U.S. wants to justify its domination of nonwhite places like the Philippines by saying that it's merely helping these places solve their problems.

The contradictory thing about this logic, though, is that the U.S. attempts to "help" by violently invading other countries and subjugating their citizens. Indeed, the country tries to end suffering "with bullets, blood or death"—simply put, the U.S. tries to end suffering by inflicting even *more* suffering.

By spotlighting this dynamic, the speaker reveals the irony of the U.S.'s entire approach to such matters. Indeed, it is this ridiculous approach that makes the country's supposed efforts to "help" nonwhite populations completely useless, which the speaker points out by saying that these endeavors are done "in vain." In other words, they don't work.

Lines 15 and 16 are a bit more ambiguous. The speaker says that the U.S. would be more effective in helping end the problems that communities of color face if it simply treated these communities with "honor." The speaker personifies honor in a rather abstract way by referencing its "holy breath," but does not clarify what "honor" actually means in this context. One thing that *is* clear, though, is that violently terrorizing vulnerable people certainly *isn't* honorable. With this in mind, it's possible the speaker means it would be best for the U.S. to simply leave people of color alone and, in *that* way, "defend" them from suffering.

The rhyme scheme in this section is especially noticeable, since the words "end it" at the end of line 13 match quite well with the words "defend it" at the end of line 15. What's more, these lines continue to follow the poem's use of iambic trimeter. As is the case throughout the poem, though, the odd-numbered lines in this section have feminine endings, meaning that there's an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line. Consider, for instance, the first two lines:

> In vain ye seek to end it
> With bullets, blood or death–

In the above, the first line has an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line: "it." This is a feminine ending, and it is what defines the meter in this particular poem, which is modeled off of the same meter used in Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Interestingly enough, though, there are certain moments when the meter varies. For example, this happens in line 15, which begins with a metrical substitution:

> Better by far defend it

The first foot of this line ("Better") is a trochee instead of an iamb, meaning that it contains a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. This, in turn, calls attention to the idea that it would be far preferable for the U.S. to "defend" communities of color with "honor" than storm their countries and violently dominate them.

LINES 17-20

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
His back is broad though sore;
What though the weight oppress him,
He's borne the like before.

The speaker begins the third stanza by once more repeating what has become the poem's refrain, saying, "Pile on the Black Man's Burden." This repetition is important to note, since the more the speaker says this sarcastic comment, the more ironic the poem's overall tone becomes. This is especially true because the majority of the poem's other lines blatantly critique the U.S. for its racist and oppressive behavior. With this in mind, the speaker's suggestion that the government should *add* to its terrible mistreatment of Black Americans comes to seem increasingly absurd.

After repeating the refrain, the speaker points out that Black Americans have endured racism and oppression for many years. Indeed, lines 18 through 20 acknowledge both the terrible toll racism has had on the lives of Black Americans *and* the fact that this has, in some ways, led to resiliency.

But just because Black Americans have become accustomed to racism doesn't mean the "weight" of oppression has become unnoticeable. On the contrary, this "weight" has accumulated over time and become an enormous "burden" that Black people are all but forced to endure. And yet, the speaker remains adamant that Black Americans have "borne the like" of racism and oppression before, ultimately setting forth a somewhat optimistic mentality about the Black community's ability to overcome hardship.

Lines 17 and 19 feature the alliteration of the /b/ sound, which appears four times in the course of the two lines:

> Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
> His back is broad though sore

This alliterative /b/ sound also returns in line 20 when the speaker says, "He's borne the like before." Similarly, the /w/ sound alliterates in line 19: "What though the weight oppress him." On the whole, this use of alliteration gives these lines a unified sound, and the repetition of the /b/ sound helps the speaker emphasize important words like "Black," "Burden," "back," "broad," and "borne."

It's also worth noting that every one of these lines is end-stopped. This aligns with the style of the rest of the poem, since the vast majority of the other lines are also end-stopped. The fact that very few of the lines are enjambed creates a measured

effect, as if the speaker is in complete control of these words, which have been carefully chosen. In turn, it begins to feel as if the irony and sarcasm that appear in "The Black Man's Burden" are deployed in a very intentional and effective way.

LINES 21-24

Your Jim-crow laws and customs,
And fiendish midnight deed,
Though winked at by the nation,
Will some day trouble breed.

"The Black Man's Burden" was published in 1899, meaning that the racist segregation policies known as Jim Crow laws were still in effect (and remained in effect in many ways until 1964). The speaker alludes to these in line 21, before going on to condemn a "fiendish midnight deed." This refers to the horrific violence enacted against Black people, including late-night lynchings. The phrase is also a specific reference to the troubling history of white enslavers raping enslaved people; though the poem was written some 30 or so years after the end of slavery, this violence of course had lasting consequences (especially since enslaved Black women often became pregnant as a result).

The speaker notes that the entire nation has "winked" at this terrible history. This means that, even though everyone is well aware of how badly Black people have been treated, the nation as a whole refuses to fully acknowledge such things, instead treating this torrid history like little more than an inside joke or inconsequential secret.

However, the speaker implies that the racist leaders of the U.S. won't be able to ignore the implications of such horrific behavior forever. Rather, the country's history of oppression will "breed" "trouble" in the future, as these heinous wrongs will someday catch up to the people who refuse to acknowledge them.

The speaker's use of the word "breed" in this moment aligns with the previous allusion to enslavers raping and impregnating enslaved people. By using this word, the speaker alludes to the terrible behavior of white enslavers while also suggesting that acting so immorally will ultimately end up creating trouble for the racist white people who think they're so powerful and untouchable.

It's also worth noting that the speaker uses personification in line 23, saying that the entire country "wink[s]" at the "fiendish midnight deed." By saying this, the speaker talks about the country as if it's a single person, thereby implicating everyone in the mistreatment and oppression of Black Americans. This, in turn, suggests that silence and passivity in the face of immorality is unacceptable and that the nation's failure to stop racism will haunt it in the future.

On a more technical level, the speaker uses consonance in these lines to place emphasis on certain words. For instance, the /d/ sound in 22 is quite notable: "And fiendish midnight deed." This consonance makes the line stand out, intensifying the language in a way that aligns with the troubling nature of this line. As a result of this intensified language, it becomes difficult for readers to speed through this section without stopping to think of the ways in which the country has profoundly wronged people of color.

LINES 25-28

Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
At length 'twill heaven pierce;
Then on you or your children
Will reign God's judgments fierce.

Like the other stanzas, the poem's final stanza begins with the poem's refrain: "Pile on the Black Man's Burden." This time, though, the speaker builds upon the metaphorical idea that there is an actual pile accumulating on the backs of Black Americans. To that end, the speaker suggests that this pile will someday grow so large that it will "pierce" the heavens, at which point God will take notice and smite the oppressors and their loved ones.

This cements the poem's implication that immoral behavior won't go unpunished forever. Although powerful white people are unfortunately able to dominate certain populations because they have worked to ensure that these communities are especially vulnerable, the speaker believes that these oppressors will someday face the consequences of their racist and inhumane actions. More specifically, it becomes particularly clear in this moment that this belief is tied to a religious outlook, as the speaker upholds that God will be the one to hold racists accountable for their immorality.

This section features one of the poem's only moments of enjambment, since almost every other line is end-stopped. Indeed, line 27 doesn't quite make sense on its own, since the phrase "Then on you or your children" doesn't mean anything without the phrase that follows it, which is: "Will reign God's judgments fierce." The fact that this is enjambed when the majority of the other lines are end-stopped is especially notable because it momentarily speeds up the pace of the poem, briefly creating a new rhythm that heightens the drama of this section—an effect that pairs well with the speaker's suggestion that powerful white racists will someday experience the "fierce" judgment of God.

These lines also feature the consonance of the /r/ sound, which patterns its way through the words:

At length 'twill heaven pierce
Then on you or your children
Will reign God's judgments fierce

The /r/ sound connects the words "pierce," "children," "reign," and "fierce," all of which are the section's most important words

that spell out the suffering racist white people will someday face as a result of their immoral actions. What's more, the poem's rhyme scheme helps emphasize the words "pierce" and "fierce"—harsh words that effectively accentuate the unrelenting punishment the speaker believes God will eventually dole out.

LINES 29-32

Your battleships and armies
May weaker ones appall,
But God Almighty's justice
They'll not disturb at all.

The last four lines of the poem reiterate the idea that racists will be no match for the fury of God, regardless of how powerful they are now. With this in mind, the speaker acknowledges that racists are certainly capable of intimidating and dominating vulnerable populations with "battleships and armies." However, these forms of power will eventually pale in comparison to God's wrath, which will restore "justice" to the world.

On the whole, this entire idea is founded on the speaker's religious faith. Interestingly enough, the first half of the poem doesn't contain any mention of God or religion, instead taking on a sarcastic, ironic tone as a way of pointing out the racist mindset that comes along with imperialism (which is the practice of dominating other nations using diplomacy or militaristic force). The second half of the poem, though, focuses on the idea that this kind of immoral behavior will someday be punished by God. In this way, "The Black Man's Burden" becomes a religious poem, since the speaker takes comfort in the belief that God won't let bigotry run rampant forever.

To that end, these final four lines set forth a bold sense of righteousness, as the speaker does more than simply allude to the fact that racists will someday face "trouble." Indeed, the speaker ends the poem by explicitly stating that God will punish racists, thereby concluding on an optimistic and unquestioningly religious note.

To add to this, these lines are particularly musical. In particular, consonance of the /l/ sound runs throughout and makes certain words stand out:

Your battleships and armies
May weaker ones appall,
But God Almighty's justice
They'll not disturb at all.

This consonant /l/ sound pairs well with the speaker's use of assonance, especially in words like "appall" and "Almighty," since both words feature both the /l/ sound and the /aw/ sound. In turn, these two words create an internal slant rhyme that anticipates the end of the rhyme scheme in line 32, when the speaker rhymes the words "at all" with the word "appall," which appears at the end of line 30.

As a result of this combined use of consonance and assonance, the musicality of these lines becomes quite pronounced. In this regard, the final four lines almost sound like the speaker is delivering a sermon—an appropriate effect, given that the poem has become so religious. It is in this capacity, then, that the speaker expresses hope, ultimately allowing the poem's language to reflect God's power and the righteous idea that racists will one day regret their immoral behavior.

SYMBOLS

THE BURDEN

Throughout the poem, the speaker mentions a "burden." Simply put, this represents the racism and oppression that Black people face in the United States. Because the speaker says, "Pile on the Black Man's Burden," the "burden" itself is presented as something that builds up over time. This idea becomes even more evident in the third stanza, when the speaker implies that Black people carry the weight of oppression on their backs. More specifically, the speaker implies in the final stanza that these injustices will someday stack up so high that they will "pierce" the heavens.

In turn, the poem presents the burden of racism as something that accumulates over time, constantly getting bigger and bigger. In this sense, the idea of adding to "the Black Man's Burden" further symbolizes that the effects of racism and oppression don't simply fade away. Rather, they build up, increasing incrementally and pressing down on people who are forced to deal with an entire history of oppression.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 9:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Lines 17-20:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / His back is broad though sore; / What though the weight oppress him, / He's borne the like before."
- **Lines 25-26:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / At length 'twill heaven pierce;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There are a number of alliterative moments that appear throughout the poem. The speaker tends to use short bursts of alliteration, connecting words with one another while also drawing extra attention to these words. For instance, the refrain contains the alliterative /b/ sound, which repeats twice:

> Pile on the Black Man's Burden

This repetition of the /b/ sound links the words "Black" and "Burden," both of which are central to the line. Alliteration draws attention to the idea that Black Americans are forced to endure the terrible weight of racism and oppression. The alliteration here also makes the line come across as especially musical. This, in turn, strengthens the use of this line as the poem's refrain, giving it a memorable, catchy sound.

For another example, consider the way that the /b/ and /d/ sounds weave through one another in lines 14 and 15:

> With bullets, blood or death–
> Better by far defend it

This is a very alliterative line, and the way the speaker alternates between the bold /b/ and /d/ sounds is powerful—perhaps even evoking the violent pummeling of "bullets." Again, the speaker's use of alliteration spotlights certain words while also increasing the poem's intensity in moments.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Black," "Burden"
- **Line 4:** "Hawaii's"
- **Line 5:** "Halt," "ye," "your," "fearless"
- **Line 6:** "feeble," "folks"
- **Line 7:** "fight," "arrows"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "Black," "Burden"
- **Line 10:** "wail," "with"
- **Line 14:** "bullets," "blood," "death"
- **Line 15:** "Better," "by," "defend"
- **Line 16:** "breath"
- **Line 17:** "Black," "Burden"
- **Line 18:** "back," "broad"
- **Line 19:** "What," "weight"
- **Line 20:** "borne," "before"
- **Line 21:** "crow," "customs"
- **Line 25:** "Black," "Burden"
- **Line 27:** "you," "your"
- **Line 30:** "appall"
- **Line 31:** "Almighty's"

ALLUSION

"The Black Man's Burden" contains quite a few allusions to various political and historical events. The most obvious allusion appears in the very title of the poem, since it is a direct reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden."

By titling this poem "The Black Man's Burden," then, Johnson wants readers to know that he's responding to Kipling's poem—and by doing *that*, Johnson ultimately sets himself up to parody and challenge the racist ideas set forth in "The White Man's Burden." Alluding to Kipling's poem becomes a rhetorical tool that helps Johnson—or the poem's speaker—offer up ideas that go against the ideas found in "The White Man's Burden."

Moving on from the poem's title and central refrain, the speaker also alludes to the fact that the U.S. has oppressed Black Americans for many, many years. This, after all, is why the "Black Man's Burden" is "nearest at [the country's] door," meaning that the mistreatment of Black people is an immediate and pressing problem.

This is also a subtle allusion to the fact that the U.S. actively wants to invade other countries and subjugate still more nonwhite populations. The speaker is essentially saying (sarcastically) that if the nation wants so badly to oppress people of color, it doesn't need to go to all the trouble of traveling abroad since it is already thoroughly oppressing communities of color right at home.

In keeping with this, the speaker mentions "long bleeding Cuba" and "dark Hawaii's shore" as a way of alluding to the fact that the U.S. wants to subjugate other nonwhite populations under the guise of friendly foreign policy. More specifically, this is an allusion to the country's invasion of Cuba in 1898 and the overthrow of Hawaii (which was at the time an independent kingdom) in the same year. In both cases, the U.S. asserted its influence abroad in order to establish power in different regions. In particular, the invasion of Cuba was carried out as a result of the Spanish-American War, in which both countries struggled to establish strong political footholds in Cuba.

The fact that the poem is a response to "The White Man's Burden" also means that it alludes to the U.S.'s desire to conquer the Philippines, since Kipling's poem is intended to encourage the country to do this. As a result, the entire poem is an allusion to the tensions that ultimately led to the Philippine-American War. This, it seems, is why the speaker brings up Cuba and Hawaii, turning to these references as a way of suggesting that it's completely unnecessary for the U.S. to dominate yet *another* foreign population.

Because the speaker connects the U.S.'s domineering foreign policy to its history of racism, there are also several allusions to the country's domestic policies and practices that promote racism. The speaker even mentions Jim Crow laws, which is not necessarily an *allusion* as much as it is a direct reference. Still, the phrase "fiendish midnight deed" is a somewhat ambiguous allusion either to the country's horrific history of lynching or the fact that many white enslavers raped and impregnated enslaved Black women—something, the speaker says, the majority of the country chooses to ignore even though everyone knows this was a frequent occurrence during slavery.

On the whole, the speaker uses allusion as a way of bringing up important historical or political events without completely

derailing the poem. For instance, instead of spending multiple lines explaining the nuances of the invasion of Cuba or the overthrow of Hawaii, the speaker merely alludes to these things.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / 'Tis nearest at your door; / Why heed long bleeding Cuba / Or dark Hawaii's shore?"
- **Lines 11-12:** "You've sealed the Red Man's problem / And will take up the Brown."
- **Lines 21-24:** "Your Jim-crow laws and customs, / And fiendish midnight deed, / Though winked at by the nation, / Will some day trouble breed."

ASSONANCE

"The Black Man's Burden" is a very assonant poem. This is especially apparent in the poem's first stanza, specifically lines 2-6, in which the long /ee/ sound repeats quite frequently:

> 'Tis nearest at your door;
> Why heed long bleeding Cuba
> Or dark Hawaii's shore?
> Halt ye your fearless armies
> Which menace feeble folks

Assonance helps the stanza feel quite cohesive and unified. This is especially true because the assonant /ee/ sound sometimes creates internal slant rhymes, which is exactly what happens in line 3 between the words "heed" and "bleeding." Assonance enhances the poem's musicality, giving it a rather pleasant tone that makes the speaker's language sound measured and controlled—despite the fact that the poem is a harsh critique of imperialism and racism.

In other sections, the speaker uses assonance to emphasize important words. For example, the speaker often echoes the /ah/ sound of the poem's refrain in the following line:

> Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
> His back is broad though sore

The assonance in this section links the words "Black," "back," and, arguably, "Man," which has a very similar vowel sound. This calls attention to the idea that Black people in the U.S. are forced to shoulder the immense weight of racism. (This connection is supported by the alliteration of the heavy /b/ sounds in these lines as well.) In turn, the speaker's use of assonance not only enhances the sound of the poem and its general musicality, but also helps the speaker spotlight certain words and ideas that are central to the poem's meaning.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "nearest," "your," "door"
- **Line 3:** "Why," "heed," "bleeding"
- **Line 4:** "Hawaii's," "shore"
- **Line 5:** "ye," "fearless," "armies"
- **Line 6:** "feeble," "folks"
- **Line 7:** "fight"
- **Line 8:** "smoke"
- **Line 9:** "Black"
- **Line 10:** "laughter," "drown"
- **Line 11:** "sealed"
- **Line 12:** "Brown"
- **Line 13:** "ye," "seek," "end"
- **Line 14:** "bullets," "death"
- **Line 15:** "Better," "defend"
- **Line 16:** "breath"
- **Line 17:** "Black"
- **Line 18:** "back," "sore"
- **Line 20:** "borne," "before"
- **Line 22:** "fiendish," "deed"
- **Line 23:** "nation"
- **Line 24:** "day," "breed"
- **Line 26:** "pierce"
- **Line 28:** "fierce"
- **Line 29:** "armies"
- **Line 30:** "appall"
- **Line 31:** "God," "Almighty's"
- **Line 32:** "not," "all"

CONSONANCE

The speaker's frequent use of consonance, like its use of assonance and alliteration, adds to the poem's musicality, creates connections between words, and draws readers' attention to important moments.

For a clear example of consonance, note the repetition of the /w/, /h/, /l/, /k/, and /r/ sounds in lines 3 and 4:

> Why heed long bleeding Cuba
> Or dark Hawaii's shore?

On one level, the dense consonance here reflects the speaker's skill with language and control over the poem. These clusters of sound add to the poem's music, making it feel especially memorable and bold—which is part of the point; the speaker is making a strong, intense argument, and thus wants to come across as someone with confidence and authority. To that end, consonance essentially turns up the poem's volume.

The poem also contains moments of sibilance, which is a specific kind of consonance. Take lines 5 and 6, which contain /s/ sounds as well as soft /f/ sounds:

Halt ye your fearless armies
Which menace feeble folks,

The mixture of soft, almost lisping sounds here evokes the "feebleness"—or weakness—of those "folks" the U.S. armies are attacking. It also perhaps subtly undermines the dignity of those armies themselves, describing them with the same gentle sounds used to describe the people they attack.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 29
- Line 30
- Line 31
- Line 32

REFRAIN

Throughout the poem, the speaker begins each new stanza by repeating the poem's title. In doing so, the speaker creates a refrain that keeps reminding readers of the poem's main concern: that any new form of racist oppression will only *add* to the U.S.'s historical persecution of Black Americans. By repeating the phrase "Pile on the Black Man's Burden" in the first line of every stanza, the speaker emphasizes the fact that the U.S. is *already* oppressing an entire population of people on its very own soil, ultimately reminding readers of the country's terrible domestic problems. As a result, it comes to seem even more absurd that the nation would consider trying to "help" other vulnerable communities of color abroad.

This refrain also helps the speaker broaden the scope of the poem. The poem is about the specific troubles Black Americans face, but it's also about U.S. foreign policy and imperialism (the practice of conquering other nations using diplomatic or militaristic force).

Of course, the *point* of the poem is that these two things are directly related to each other, but the speaker's focus on places like Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines—as well as the focus on the country's treatment of Native Americans—makes it likely that readers might forget the fact that the poem is centered around the weight of oppression that Black people experience. By repeating the refrain, "Pile on the Black Man's Burden," then, the speaker ensures that readers don't lose sight of the poem's central argument, which is that imperialism arises from the same kind of racist mindset that has historically fueled the subjugation of Black Americans.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 9:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 17:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 25:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"

END-STOPPED LINE

Almost every single line of "The Black Man's Burden" is end-stopped. This creates a clipped, controlled sound that fits with the poem's strict adherence to its metrical pattern (iambic trimeter with a feminine ending in every other line). The speaker's use of end-stops makes the lines sound self-contained and measured, giving the poem a sense of predictability and consistency.

Most of the lines here contain syntactically complete phrases that can stand on their own. Consider, for instance, lines 21 through 24:

Your Jim-crow laws and customs,
And fiendish midnight deed,
Though winked at by the nation,
Will some day trouble breed.

Although these lines make up just one sentence, the various parts of this sentence are divided into clear, discernible clauses.

There are, however, several moments of enjambment in the final stanza. For example, line 27 is enjambed because it depends on line 28 in order to make sense:

Then on you or your children
Will reign God's judgments fierce.

The phrase "Then on you or your children" does not stand on its own because it is the beginning of a sentence and gives readers no sense of context. Because there is no verb in the first half of this sentence, line 27 is incomplete without line 28. This dynamic repeats in lines 29 ("Your battleships and armies") and 31 ("But God Almighty's justice"), both of which are also enjambed. These lines, however, are quite unusual in "The Black Man's Burden," which is otherwise characterized by its heavy use of end-stopped lines to create a highly controlled and rhythmic feel.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Burden,"
- **Line 2:** "door;"
- **Line 3:** "Cuba"
- **Line 4:** "shore?"
- **Line 5:** "armies"
- **Line 6:** "folks,"
- **Line 7:** "arrows"
- **Line 8:** "smoke."
- **Line 9:** "Burden,"
- **Line 10:** "drown,"
- **Line 11:** "problem"
- **Line 12:** "Brown."
- **Line 13:** "it"
- **Line 14:** "death—"
- **Line 15:** "it"
- **Line 16:** "breath."
- **Line 17:** "Burden,"
- **Line 18:** " sore;"
- **Line 19:** "him,"
- **Line 20:** "before."
- **Line 21:** "customs,"
- **Line 22:** "deed,"
- **Line 23:** "nation,"
- **Line 24:** "breed."
- **Line 25:** "Burden,"
- **Line 26:** "pierce;"
- **Line 28:** "fierce."
- **Line 30:** "appall,"
- **Line 32:** "all."

IRONY

The speaker's sarcastic suggestion that the U.S. should "Pile on the Black Man's Burden" is a form of irony, in that the speaker purposefully says this to express the *opposite* sentiment; the speaker doesn't *actually* want the U.S. to make life even harder for Black people.

The speaker also uses irony when suggesting that the U.S. shouldn't go to the trouble of looking abroad for new people to subjugate, since the country could simply continue to focus on oppressing Black Americans. Of course, the speaker doesn't really want the country to focus its racist attention of subjugating Black Americans, which is what makes this entire idea an example of irony. The speaker is purposefully playing into the racist mindset that fuels both racism and imperialism in order to critique that mindset.

The speaker's suggestion that the U.S. has solved the "problem[s]" that Native Americans face is also ironic. After all, the "problem[s]" that Native Americans face were primarily (if not completely) *created* by the U.S., which is why it's ridiculous to say that the country has helped Native Americans overcome their various trials and tribulations.

In these ways, then, the speaker uses irony to reveal the flawed and racist outlook that unfortunately works its way into so many of the country's policies. And in doing so, the speaker invites readers to not only scrutinize the nation's flaws more critically, but also laugh at the absurd thought process that fuels racist ways of governing.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / 'Tis nearest at your door; / Why heed long bleeding Cuba / Or dark Hawaii's shore?"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / His wail with laughter drown, / You've sealed the Red Man's problem / And will take up the Brown."
- **Line 17:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 25:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker poses a rhetorical question early in the poem, sarcastically asking why the U.S. would bother going all the way to places like Cuba or Hawaii in order to subjugate nonwhite populations when it could simply double down on its oppression of Black Americans, thus adding to the "Black Man's Burden."

This question is not meant to be answered, which is what makes it rhetorical. The speaker asks this question in order to make a persuasive point—namely, that the U.S. has already oppressed Black Americans and that any new form of racist domination it carries out will only *add* to this horrible history of bigotry and subjugation.

It's worth noting that this rhetorical question is followed by a less sarcastic comment, as the speaker goes on in lines 5 and 6 to say, "Halt ye your fearless armies / Which menace feeble folks." While the rhetorical question in lines 3 and 4 subtly critiques the U.S. by using a tongue-in-cheek tone, the speaker's directness in lines 5 and 6 drives home the fact that the nation uses its power to bully and oppress groups of people who are often unable to defend themselves. By pairing the slyness of a rhetorical question with the straightforwardness of the statement that follows it, then, the speaker manages to

mount a full-scale attack on the racism that drives the country's powerful leaders.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Why heed long bleeding Cuba / Or dark Hawaii's shore?"

METAPHOR

The speaker's recurring suggestion that the U.S. ought to "Pile on the Black Man's Burden" creates a metaphorical image of an actual pile or heap of injustice that steadily builds up on the backs of Black people. This, in turn, presents a metaphor in which the experience of enduring racism is compared to the experience of being slowly crushed by a weight that continues to get heavier and heavier.

This metaphor is especially present in the third stanza, when the speaker says:

> Pile on the Black Man's Burden,
> His back is broad though sore;
> What though the weight oppress him,
> He's borne the like before."

In this section, the speaker presents a clear image of Black people carrying around the "weight" of oppression, an experience that makes Black people "broad though sore," meaning that dealing with injustice for so long creates both resiliency and lasting pain.

There are other metaphorical moments in the poem as well, like when the speaker uses personification to describe "long bleeding Cuba." This description presents Cuba as a single person who has been suffering for a very long time. By using such vivid terms, the speaker reminds readers that racist and imperialist policies affect *real* people.

What's more, the speaker uses personification in the phrase "honor's holy breath," presenting honor itself as a human worthy of worship and respect. The actual significance of this is pretty ambiguous, since it's hard to say what, exactly, it would mean to "defend" something "with honor's holy breath." In this moment, then, the meaning of the poem gets lost in the speaker's abstract use of metaphor and personification. Overall, though, the speaker's use of these metaphorical devices provides readers with alternative ways of looking at the subject, ultimately enabling the speaker to more effectively challenge the country's racist ways.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 3:** "Why heed long bleeding Cuba"
- **Line 9:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 16:** "With honor's holy breath."
- **Lines 17-20:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden, / His back is broad though sore; / What though the weight oppress him, / He's borne the like before."
- **Line 25:** "Pile on the Black Man's Burden,"
- **Line 26:** "At length 'twill heaven pierce;"

VOCABULARY

Pile (Line 1, Line 9, Line 17, Line 25) - To add to something.

Burden (Line 1, Line 9, Line 17, Line 25) - A misfortune or hardship that a person is forced to endure.

'Tis (Line 2) - A dated combination of the words "it" and "is."

Heed (Line 3) - To pay attention to or focus on something.

Halt (Line 5) - Stop.

Ye (Line 5) - You.

Feeble (Line 6) - Weak or vulnerable.

Brook (Line 8) - To tolerate or face something.

Wail (Line 10) - A cry or some other loud verbal expression of anguish.

Sealed (Line 11) - To solve something or secure a certain outcome.

Brown (Line 12) - In this context, the speaker uses the word "Brown" to refer to people of color who aren't Black. This is an allusion to the fact that the U.S. wants to subjugate the Filipino population.

Vain (Line 13) - To do something in "vain" means that the effort is pointless because it will not be successful.

Seek (Line 13) - To "seek" to do something is to try to achieve a certain outcome.

Broad (Line 18) - Wide and strong.

Borne (Line 20) - Endured.

Jim Crow laws (Line 21) - Laws were laws put in place in the 1870s in the United States to enforce segregation and other racist policies.

Fiendish midnight deed (Line 22) - This either refers to the U.S.'s terrible history of lynching Black Americans or to the history of white enslavers raping enslaved Black people. In both cases, the speaker suggests that this behavior was done out of sight, though the next line makes it clear that everybody knows about both of these horrible things, even if they don't publicly acknowledge it.

'Twill (Line 26) - An antiquated combination of the words "it" and "will."

Reign (Line 28) - For something to "reign" over something else means that it prevails over that thing. In this case, "God's

judgments" will triumph over the powerful racists who have spent their lives oppressing people of color.

Appall (Line 30) - To be "appalled" is to be intensely horrified by something.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Black Man's Burden" is a 32-line poem organized into four octaves, which are stanzas made up of eight lines. These can be further broken down into pairs of quatrains, or four-line stanzas. The second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other, as do the sixth and eighth lines. The poem's use of meter rarely varies. Altogether, the poem is self-assured and steady, creating the sense of a bold and confident speaker with a clear, straightforward message.

All of this also aligns with the predictability found in Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," since "The Black Man's Burden" mimics the form of Kipling's poem (although Kipling's poem has seven stanzas instead of four). Like "The White Man's Burden," each stanza begins with a refrain, as the speaker says, "Pile on the Black Man's Burden." This not only matches the style of Kipling's poem, but also functions as an allusion to "The White Man's Burden," ultimately alerting readers to the fact that this is a direct response to Kipling.

METER

Like Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," the poem is primarily written in iambic trimeter. This means that each line has three iambs—a.k.a. metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Line 2 is a perfect example of iambic trimeter:

> 'Tis near- | est at | your door

"The Black Man's Burden" features a unique variation on this meter, however. Like "The White Man's Burden," the poem's odd-numbered lines (which are also the non-rhyming lines) include feminine endings. This means that there is an extra unstressed syllable at the very end of the line. For example, consider the first line:

> Pile on | the Black | Man's Bur den

The third foot of this line contains three syllables: "Man's Bur den." The fact that the final syllable, "den," is unstressed is what makes this a feminine ending. In turn, the lines with feminine endings destabilize the poem's overall sound, since readers most likely expect each line to end on the stressed syllable of an iamb. The feminine ending, though, strays from this convention and makes the line sound as if it's off-kilter.

On the whole, the poem's use of iambic trimeter and feminine endings is little more than a nod to Kipling's poem, as the speaker imitates the style and pacing of "The White Man's Burden." Still, though, the use of this meter adds a certain sense of predictability to the poem, even if the use of feminine endings makes the rhythm sound less ordinary than it might otherwise seem.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a rhyme scheme in which each stanza's second and fourth lines rhyme, as do its sixth and eighth lines. As such, each stanza's rhyme scheme can be mapped out like this:

> ABCBDEFE

Practically speaking, this means that all the even-numbered lines in "The Black Man's Burden" end with some kind of rhyme, whereas all the odd-numbered lines (the lines with feminine endings) do not.

Like many of the stylistic elements of "The Black Man's Burden," this rhyme scheme is a reflection of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," which features the exact same rhyme scheme. In both cases, these rhymes create a feeling of predictability and consistency while also giving the lines a musical sound. This is especially noticeable in "The Black Man's Burden" because the sing-songy rhyme scheme ends up accentuating the speaker's sarcastic, ironic tone.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Black Man's Burden" uses sarcasm and irony to highlight the racism and oppression that runs rampant throughout the U.S. As the poem progresses, though, the speaker begins to speak more straightforwardly, ultimately critiquing the U.S. for using its unchecked power to dominate vulnerable communities of color. In the poem's final stanza, the speaker warns powerful racists that their immoral behavior will be punished by God.

Because the poem's title and refrain specifically references the fact that Black Americans face racism and subjugation on a daily basis, it seems likely that the speaker is a Black American, though there's nothing else in the poem that indicates anything about the speaker's identity. Given that "The Black Man's Burden" is a direct response to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," it's also arguable that these words should be attributed to H. T. Johnson himself, who was indeed Black and also a clergyman. That said, the lack of information about the speaker in the poem itself implies that the poem's anti-racist *message* is the most important thing here, rather than the person delivering that message.

SETTING

The poem takes place in the United States, as made clear by the fact that the issues the speaker raises in have to do with the U.S. government's policies in the late 1800s. The speaker draws a comparison between the country's historical oppression (and enslavement) of Black people and the country's efforts to forcefully dominate other nonwhite populations.

Also note that the poem was written in 1899, when the U.S. was first becoming involved in the Philippine-American War. The U.S. attempted to secure control over the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War.

Although the poem itself doesn't explicitly name check either of these conflicts (or even, for that matter, the Philippines,) the fact that the poem is a response to Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" makes it quite clear that it is set against this backdrop, since Kipling's poem functioned as an open call for the U.S. to conquer the Philippines.

With this political issue in mind, the speaker of "The Black Man's Burden" also points out that the U.S. is already in the midst of oppressing Black Americans, since the racist, segregationist policies of the Jim Crow era were at that time still very much in effect. In this way, the poem is set during a period in which the country's oppressive and racist governmental policies were at work both domestically and abroad.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Black Man's Burden" has a very specific literary context because it was written as a response to a poem by Rudyard Kipling called "The White Man's Burden." Kipling's poem urged the U.S. to conquer and take control of the Philippines, arguing that this was a moral duty white people should take upon themselves.

In response, a number of people ridiculed and parodied this blatantly racist, self-serving viewpoint. Magazines published cartoons mocking the backward idea that white people should practice imperialism for the good of nonwhite populations, and writers penned essays and scathing poetic imitations denouncing Kipling's argument. The famous American writer Mark Twain even wrote an essay called "To the One Sitting in Darkness" that criticized U.S. imperialism and was seen as a response to "The White Man's Burden."

Needless to say, H. T. Johnson's "The Black Man's Burden" was among the many responses to Kipling's poem. It was published in 1899—the same year as "The White Man's Burden"—and appeared in the *Christian Recorder*, a magazine run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. At the time, H. T. Johnson was serving as the editor of the *Christian Recorder*, as this post was often filled by clergymen from the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

This specific poem is not to be confused with others that bear the same or similar names; there is, for example, a poem called "The Black Man's Burden" by Lulu Baxter Guy and another poem called "The Brown Man's Burden" by Henry Labouchère. Like Johnson, both poets mock Kipling as a way of renouncing the racism that comes along with imperialism. That these three poems are all so similar is a testament to just how many responses were published after Kipling wrote "The White Man's Burden."

In a broader literary sense, "The Black Man's Burden" was published roughly 10 years before the Modernist period. At the very end of the 1800s, literature was largely overtaken by the shift from Romanticism to Realism. In some ways, "The Black Man's Burden" illustrates this shift simply because it straightforwardly focuses on a political issue rather than exploring the beauty and appreciation of nature that defined Romanticism.

However, this poem also exists outside the scope of Realism, which is interested mainly in the accurate portrayal of everyday life. "The Black Man's Burden," on the other hand, has the specific political goal of challenging racism, ultimately making it seem more like a precursor to the protest poetry of the 20th century than anything else.

Historical Context

At the very end of the 19th century, the U.S. asserted itself over a number of areas abroad in order to expand its foreign influence. This was largely the result of the Spanish-American War, which began in 1898 in Cuba. At the time, Cuba was controlled by Spain, but by the end of the conflict (which ended within four months), the U.S. gained control of Cuba, which is why the speaker of "The Black Man's Burden" references the country's interest in Cuba.

Another result of the Spanish-American War was that the U.S. began to occupy the Philippines in August 1898, since the islands were, before the Spanish-American War, controlled by Spain. This, however, was not a seamless transition, since the Philippines had been undergoing a revolution aimed at Filipino independence since 1896, though neither Spain nor the U.S. recognized this independence. When the U.S. tried to assert its influence over the Filipino population in 1899, it led to a three-year conflict known as the Philippine-American War.

This is the historical backdrop for Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and, in turn, for Johnson's response. Kipling's poem urged the U.S. to unabashedly take up the mantel of imperialism by conquering and "civilizing" the Filipino population. Meanwhile, the U.S. was still enforcing the racist segregation laws known as Jim Crow laws, and the country's Black population was still feeling the harsh after-effects of

slavery (which had only ended roughly three decades earlier).

It is in this political and cultural climate, then, that the speaker of "The Black Man's Burden" calls attention to the nation's racism, ultimately pointing out that the country's efforts to subjugate the Filipino population are little more than an extension of the racist behavior to which it has subjected Black Americans for more than 100 years.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Philippine-American War — For more information about the circumstances that prompted Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and, thus, Johnson's "The Black Man's Burden," read this entry on the Philippine-American War. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Philippine-American-War)
- "The White Man's Burden" — For a more in-depth look at the poem that prompted the writing of "The Black Man's Burden," check out our guide of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/rudyard-kipling/the-white-man-s-burden)
- Mark Twain's Response — H. T. Johnson wasn't the only writer to respond to Rudyard Kipling's racist poem, "The White Man's Burden." Take a look, for instance, at Mark Twain's essay "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," which also addresses the racist thinking that lies behind imperialism. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/To_the_Person_Sitting_in_Darkness)
- A Portrait of Johnson — Check out this portrait of H. T. Johnson, which is housed at the Library of Congress. (https://www.loc.gov/resource/bellcm.10974/)
- The Christian Recorder — For more information about the publication that first published "The Black Man's Burden," read this brief overview of The Christian Recorder, which H. T. Johnson edited from 1893 to 1902. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/christian-recorder)

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