Opposing Viewpoints

One of the justifications for European imperialism was the notion that superior white peoples had a moral obligation to raise ignorant native peoples to a higher level of civilization. The British poet Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) captured this notion in his poem *The White Man’s Burden*. The Western attempt to justify imperialism on the basis of moral responsibility, evident in Kipling’s poem, was often hypocritical. Edward Moral, a British journalist who spent time in the Congo, pointed out the destructive effects of Western imperialism on Africans in his book *The Black Man’s Burden*.

Rudyard 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’ needs;*
*To wait in heavy harness*
*On fluttered fold 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 ye 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 cloak your weariness;*
*By all ye cry or whisper,*
*By all you 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-brought wisdom,*
*The judgment of your peers!*

Edward Moral, *The Black Man’s Burden*

It is [the Africans] who carry the “Black Man’s burden.” They have not withered away before the white man’s occupation. Indeed . . . Africa has ultimately absorbed within itself every Caucasian and, for that matter, every Semitic invader, too. In hewing out for himself a fixed abode in Africa, the white man has massacred the African in heaps. The African has survived, and it is well for the white settlers that he has . . .

What the partial occupation of his soil by the white man has failed to do; what the mapping out of European political “spheres of influence” has failed to do; what the Maxim [machine gun] and the rifle, the slave gang, labor in the bowels of the earth and the lash, have failed to do; what imported measles, smallpox and syphilis have failed to do; whatever the overseas slave trade failed to do; the power of modern capitalistic exploitation, assisted by modern engines of destruction, may yet succeed in accomplishing.

For from the evils of the latter, scientifically applied and enforced, there is no escape for the African. Its destructive effects are not spasmodic: they are permanent. In its permanence resides its fatal consequences. It kills not the body merely, but the soul. It breaks the spirit. It attacks the African at every turn, from every point of vantage. It wrecks his polity, uproots him from the land, invades his family life, destroys his natural pursuits and occupations, claims his whole time, enslaves him in his own home . . .
In Africa, especially in tropical Africa, which a capitalistic imperialism threatens and has, in part, already devastated, man is incapable of reacting against unnatural conditions. In those regions man is engaged in a perpetual struggle against disease and an exhausting climate, which tells heavily upon childbearing; and there is no scientific machinery for saving the weaker members of the community. The African of the tropics is capable of tremendous physical labors. But he cannot accommodate himself to the European system of monotonous, uninterrupted labor, with its long and regular hours, involving, moreover, as it frequently does, severance from natural surroundings and nostalgia, the condition of melancholy resulting from separation from home, a malady to which the African is specially prone. Climatic conditions forbid it. When the system is forced upon him, the tropical African droops and dies.

Nor is violent physical opposition to abuse and injustice henceforth possible for the African in any part of Africa. His chances of effective resistance have been steadily dwindling with the increasing perfectibility in the killing power of modern armament . . .

Thus, the African is really helpless against the material gods of the white man, as embodied in the trinity of imperialism, capitalism exploitation, and militarism . . .

To reduce all the varied and picturesque and stimulating episodes in savage life to a dull routine of endless toil for uncomprehended ends, to dislocate social ties and disrupt social institutions; to stifle nascent desires and crush mental development; to graft upon primitive passions the annihilating evils of scientific slavery, and the bestial imaginings of civilized man, unrestrained by convention or law; in fine, to kill the soul in a people – this is a crime which transcends physical murder.

With a partner, answer the following questions:

- What is the central argument in Kipling's poem, “The White Man’s Burden”?
- Is he advocating European expansion and Western imperialism, or is he pointing out the responsibilities that go with imperialism, or both?
- Is the poem idealistic, racist, paternalistic, or something else? How so?
- Within European society, who might be inspired by Kipling’s poem, and who would not?
- Compare the excerpt from Morel’s The Black Man’s Burden with Kipling’s poem. How does the piece by Morel challenge or undermine Kipling’s beliefs?
- What are Morel’s criticisms of European imperialism in Africa?
- Would Morel’s condemnation of imperialism have a significant impact in the early twentieth century? Why, or why not?
- By the early twenty-first century, which of the writers seems most relevant? Why?