In this text I’m going to analyze the poem “The white man’s burden” by Rudyard Kipling.

From the title, I expect to read a “racist” poem, being about a “white man”. Also, the expression “burden” creates curiosity and makes the reader want to read the poem to know what’s the “white man’s” load or responsibility.

The text is formed by seven stanzas, all beginning with the refraining expression “Take up the white man’s burden” taken from the title.

The text present a set of recurrent opposing themes such as the juxtaposition of childhood and manhood, life and death, war and peace, burden and profit.

The main juxtaposition in the text is the one between the colonizers and the colonized. The poet speaks for the colonizing, represented by the “white man”.

The poem presents an apology for the colonizers’ actions. The “white man” is presented as a hero that fights for the progress and the good of the colonized. His heroism is given by the many sacrifices he makes that are “listed” in the poem. Those sacrifices are “the white man’s burden”: he sacrifices himself for the good of people who hate him for it, he fights for their profit, without boasting it, knowing they aren’t aware of this, being inferior.

The juxtaposition between colonizers and colonized is given by the use of language, too.

The colonized are “fluttered folk and wild – / Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / half-devil and half-child”. They are presented almost as animals and as a white man’s property and characterized as full of “sloth and heathen Folly”. They are “savage” and “retrograde”, but they’re happy about it. Also, they’re criticized because of their opposition to the white man’s politics.

On the contrary, the colonizers are almost presented as “victims” and are characterized as extremely “manly”. They are “binded to exile” in a land of “savage wars of peace” presented as extremely hard and difficult and rewarded only with “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?»”. This presents the colonized as ungrateful and ignorant and “justifies” the colonizers’ actions. This is underlined by the biblical quote to the Jews’ slavery in Egypt. In addition, they are presented as common people, underlining their actions’ heroism.

The “savage wars of peace” sound like a paradox. However they summarize the entire poem. Indeed the juxtaposition between the two cultures is almost presented like a war, but the colonisers’ aim is peace.

This is typically victorian. In particular it recalls the concept of philanthropy, for which the rich had to help the poor, but in the poem this concept recalls hypocrisy. Indeed, the poet calls the colonizers for action using the imperative form, but he does it without the consent of the colonized, that are characterized as ungrateful and inferior for it.

Another victorian concept is the one of profit. In the text, it’s used referring to the colonized: “To seek another’s profit, / And work another’s gain.” However the author’s use of it is rather ironic, because the colonized don’t want to “gain”.

The poem has a steady rhythm that recalls a march’s one and encourages the colonizers (and the readers) to act

In conclusion, the poem allows the colonizers to not feel guilty about their actions, focusing entirely on their losses and the hardness of their venture, encouraging them to “fight for peace” and for the progress of the colonised.