

The Gods of the Copybook Headings

by [Rudyard Kipling](#), 1865-1936

reworded by Bill Whittle

Well, hi everybody, welcome to 'After Burner', I'm Bill Whittle. I was lucky enough to have gone to British schools while growing up in Bermuda and one of the many, many advantages of that education was a chance to get to know Rudyard Kipling (Joseph Rudyard Kipling; 30 December 1865 – 18 January 1936) was an Indian-born English short-story writer, poet, and novelist chiefly remembered for his tales and poems of British soldiers in India and his tales for children.). In school we read about *Gunga Din* ((1892) is a poem by Rudyard Kipling) and the British in India, and at home we read *Just So* stories (The *Just So Stories for Little Children* are a collection written by the British author Rudyard Kipling.) to learn how the rhinoceros got its skin, and how the leopard got its spots, but lately, a poem of Kipling's has been making the rounds, and it's an important poem. Because it really encapsulates how and why things seem to fall apart just as they reach their zenith; and I'd like to read that poem for you, but before I do, but before I do, I need to translate it from English into..English, more specifically from the British English of 1919 into the American English of 2012.

The poem is called "The Gods of the Copybook Headings", and really, all I really need to do to complete the translation is to change two phrases and a word or two to keep up the rhyme. Now, one of those two phrases is the title of the poem itself. Copybook Headings were small [aphorisms](#), simple little statements of common sense and virtue that were printed at the head of a student's copybook for them to copy over and over again in order for them to practice penmanship, and to learn some virtue and wisdom in the bargain. A copybook heading might be something like this: There's nothing so keenly as kindness, and nothing so royal as truth.

So, the Gods of "the Copybook Headings " really means "the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue", and set against the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue are other gods, which Kipling called "the Gods of the Marketplace". But marketplace had a different meaning then too. Today, when we say marketplace, we tend to think of Wallstreet and Finance, but in Kipling's time, the marketplace was a bustling hive of rumor and gossip, the place where fads just ran wild, where reason was scarce, and the latest nonsense was in fashion, so I'm going to change "Gods of the Marketplace" to "the Gods of the Here and the Now". And so with the trepidation and the begging of forgiveness that any author asks when he changes the words of a far greater writer, here's Kipling's poem for modern ears:

As I pass through my reincarnations, in every age I vow to make my proper prostrations to the gods of the here and the now. Peering through reverent fingers, I watch them flourish and fall, and the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue I notice always outlast them all. We were living in trees when they met us, they showed us each in turn, that water will certainly wet us, as fire would certainly burn, but we found them lacking in uplift, vision, and breadth of mind, so we left them to teach the gorillas, while we followed the march of mankind.

We moved as their Spirits listed, we never knew why or how,
Being neither cloud nor wind-borne like the Gods of the Here and the Now;

But they always caught up with our progress, and presently word would come
That a tribe had been wiped off its icefield, or the lights had gone out in Rome.

With the Hopes that our World is built on they were utterly out to sea,
They denied that wealth could be printed, they denied that lunches were free;
They denied that Wishes were Horses; they denied that a Pig had Wings;
So we worshipped the Gods of the Here and the Now who promised these beautiful things.

When the Cambrian measures were forming, They promised perpetual peace.
They swore, if we gave them our weapons, that the wars of the tribes would cease.
But when we disarmed, they sold us and delivered us bound to our foe,
And the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue said: "Stick to the Devil you know."

On the first Jurassic Sandstones we were promised the Fuller Life
(Which started by loving our neighbour and ended by loving his wife)
Till our women had no more children and the men lost reason and faith,
And the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue said: "The Wages of Sin is Death."

In the Carboniferous Epoch we were promised abundance for all,
By robbing selected Peter to pay for collective Paul;
But, though we had plenty of money, there was nothing our money could buy,
And the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue said: "If you don't work, you die."

Then the Gods of the Here and Now tumbled, and their smooth-tongued wizards withdrew
And the hearts of the meanest were humbled and began to believe it was true
That All is not Gold that Glitters, and Two plus Two make Four —
And the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue limped up to explain it once more.

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As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of Man —
There are only four things certain since Social Progress began: —
That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the Sow returns to her Mire,
And the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the Fire;

And after all this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins
When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his sins,
As surely as Water will wet us, as surely as Fire will burn,
The Gods of Wisdom and Virtue with terror and slaughter return!

You know, America was home to the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue for most of its existence. If we abandon them further, they will return with terror and slaughter, and yet they're not cruel Gods, they're simply Gods of Justice. They are in fact, the Gods of cause and effect. By following their example, the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue have given all of this, all this wealth, all this security, and all this luxury. All they ask of us was a little wisdom, and a little virtue, a little common sense here, a little good behavior over there. But, we've been crashing on their couches, and bumming rides from these Gods for a long, long time now, and I really am afraid that the Gods of Wisdom and Virtue have had enough, and now, they want their stuff back.