### Mythology and Legend

- Achilles Heel
- Cassandra
- Gordian Knot
- Icarus/Fly Too Close to the Sun
- Janus
- Narcissus/Narcissism
- Sirens
- Sword of Damocles
- Tantalus

### Literature

- Catch-22
- Deus ex machina
- Emperor's New Clothes
- In medias res
- Mrs. Grundy
- Pound of Flesh
- Scheherazade
- Sound and Fury
- Svengali

### Language and Idioms

- All That Glitters is not Gold
- Chip on one's Shoulder
- Crocodile Tears
- Ivory Tower
- Left-handed Compliment
- Let the Cat out of the Bag/Buy a Pig in a Poke
- Magnum opus
- NIMBY
- Non sequitur
- Once in a Blue Moon
- Sacred Cow
- Skeleton in the Closet
- Tabula rasa
- White Elephant
Item #1—Mythology and Legend

Achilles’ Heel

This term is from **Greek Mythology**. According to myth, when Achilles was a baby, his mother dipped him in the **River Styx** because the waters from this river gave **immortality** to humans. His mother held him by his **heel**, so that was the only place on his body not touched by the water. From then on, **Achilles’ heel** was his one area of **vulnerability**. Eventually, Achilles was killed during the Trojan War when a poisoned arrow struck his heel.

Today, the term has come to refer to a person’s **area of particular vulnerability**.

**Examples**

Her inability to resist rich desserts was her Achilles’ heel, keeping her from losing the ten pounds she wanted to lose.

The politician’s desire to be liked by everyone was his Achilles’ heel, preventing him from taking a strong stand on any issue and leading to his defeat in the election.

Item #2—Literature

Pound of Flesh

This phrase comes from **Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice**. In this play, Shylock, a moneylender, agrees to finance a fleet of ships for a young merchant, Antonio. In the contract, Shylock demands a **pound of Antonio’s flesh** as payment should anything happen to the ships. When the ships are lost at sea, Shylock insists that he must have a **pound of flesh**, as the contract demanded. Antonio is spared only because of a technicality: the contract did not say Shylock was entitled to any of Antonio’s blood. Thus, he cannot take a pound of Antonio’s flesh unless he can do so bloodlessly, an impossibility.

This phrase is used to describe someone’s **insistence on being repaid**, even if the repayment will destroy or harm the debtor.

**Examples**

“Sure, that initial low rate for a credit card is tempting for a college freshman, but eventually, the company will want their pound of flesh when you get over your head in debt.”

When I agreed to do my friend’s outdoor chores if he would lend me some money, I had no way of knowing I would sprain my ankle the next day. I couldn’t believe he demanded his pound of flesh and insisted that I do the work even though I was in such pain.
Sacred Cow

In Hinduism, cows are considered to be sacred; thus, cows are not to be harmed, and certainly not killed for food. If a cow wanders into a shop, the merchant can only try to lure it out with food; he is not allowed to interfere with it by prodding or poking, even if it is breaking everything in his shop.

The idiom "Sacred Cow" refers to something that cannot be interfered with or harmed in any way.

Examples

Although the square-dancing club never attracts more than one or two members, it is Ms. Green's sacred cow, and she refuses to even consider discontinuing the club.

When budget cuts are called for because the company is losing money, employees know not to suggest abandoning the annual company picnic. That event is a sacred cow as far as the chairman of the board is concerned.

Crossing the Rubicon

After defeating the Gauls in the Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar was ordered home by his enemies in the Senate, so he traveled south toward Italy. The Rubicon was the river forming the northern boundary of Italy. By Roman law, a general was forbidden from crossing into Italy with an army. Nevertheless, Caesar led his army across the river, making civil war inevitable. After Caesar crossed the Rubicon, there was no turning back for him and his troops.

To cross the Rubicon is to take an irreversible step, often involving some danger.

Examples

When I told my boss exactly what I thought of her, I knew I had crossed the Rubicon and would soon be seeking employment elsewhere.

When we announced our intention to be the state champions, the members of our team felt we had crossed the Rubicon and that all our efforts would need to be directed toward having our best season ever.
Item #5—The Bible

Pearls before Swine

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonished his followers to “cast not your pearls before swine.” That is, his followers were to deliver their message to those who would appreciate it, not to those incapable of appreciating something of value. Swine, or pigs, would be unable to appreciate pearls if the jewels were given to them.

To “cast one’s pearls before swine” is to offer something precious to someone, or a group of people, unable to appreciate the value of what they are being given.

Examples

When he makes a profound point that we students just do not understand, our teacher sometimes shakes his head and mutters, “Pearls before swine.”

I gave my sister a rare, expensive first edition of To Kill a Mockingbird, and she simply said, “I’ve already read that book.” I realized I was casting my pearls before swine.

Item #6—Language and Idioms

Once in a Blue Moon

A “blue moon” is a second full moon within the same calendar month, a phenomenon that occurs approximately every three years. It is thought that calendar makers traditionally pictured the first full moon in red and a second full moon in the same month in blue.

This phrase describes something that occurs very rarely.

Examples

I almost always turn in my homework on time, but once in a blue moon I get lazy and decide to take the consequences of skipping an assignment.

Once in a blue moon, a candidate comes along who genuinely seems to care about his or constituents more than about advancing his or her own career.
Mrs. Grundy

In *Speed the Plough*, a 1798 play by Thomas Morton, Mrs. Grundy is a character who never appears on stage. However, other characters frequently ask, “What would Mrs. Grundy say?” Mrs. Grundy is a narrow-minded, conventional, prudish person.

The word “Grundyism” and the phrase “Mrs. Grundy” refer to such an attitude of narrow-minded prudishness.

Examples

My mother said, “At the risk of being a Mrs. Grundy, I really don’t think you should go out in public in that outfit.”

Interviewed about his controversial new film which was banned in several cities, the director said that he had expected Grundyism from those who were not able to appreciate the deeper, underlying message of the film.

Crocodile Tears

Crocodiles were once thought to shed large tears before devouring their prey. This belief, which dates to ancient times, comes from the fact that crocodiles have small ducts in the corner of their eyes which release “tears” when the crocodile opens its jaws wide. Obviously, a cold-blooded reptile has no real feelings of sympathy for its prey.

Thus, to shed crocodile tears is to show false sympathy for someone.

Examples

Although Judy shed crocodile tears for Maria when Maria was passed over for the promotion, it was apparent that Maria’s loss was seen by Judy as an opportunity to advance her own position in the company.

The villain in the play shed crocodile tears for the hero, but the audience knew that the hero’s downfall was directly caused by the villain’s trickery.
Item #9—Mythology and Legend

Sirens

In Greek mythology, Sirens were sea creatures who lured sailors to their deaths on the rocky shores by singing a beautiful, irresistible song. They are usually depicted as women, or as half-woman, half bird.

In modern usage, “sirens” can refer to anything that tempts a person away from safety and toward a destructive path. A “siren song” is the temptation used to lure a person.

Examples

In his Speech in the Virginia Convention, Patrick Henry urged his listeners not to be fooled by an “illusion of hope,” saying, “We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren, till she transforms us into beasts.” He is comparing false hope both to the sirens and to Circe, who turned Odysseus’ men into swine.

I had intended to stay home and study for finals, but the siren song of my friends describing all the fun we could have at the lake was too much for me to resist.

Item #10—History, Culture, Ideas

Read the Riot Act

Under English Common Law, an unruly crowd had to be read the Riot Act before action could be taken, to force them to disperse.

To “read the riot act” is to issue a stern warning that if unacceptable behavior does not cease, severe consequences will follow.

Examples

After asking us to be quiet several times, my father stormed upstairs and read us the riot act. After this, we knew it was really time to go to sleep.

Upset over his colleagues’ refusal to take action on the issue, the senator read the riot act to the assembly, reminding them that their inaction would likely cost their party the next election.
Thirty Pieces of Silver/Betrayed with a Kiss

In the Bible, Judas Iscariot was the disciple who agreed to betray Jesus to the authorities in exchange for payment. The thirty pieces of silver were the price of Judas’ betrayal. The way Judas identified Jesus for the authorities was to approach Jesus and greet him with a kiss of identification.

“Thirty pieces of silver” refers to payment received for an act of treachery. “Betrayed with a kiss” refers to a supposed friend’s treachery.

Examples

Patrick Henry warned his listeners about the supposed friendliness of the British. He warned, “Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.”

When the city council member abruptly changed his vote to support the wealthy developer’s controversial project, some of his colleagues muttered that he undoubtedly would receive his thirty pieces of silver from the developer.

Gordian Knot

According to legend, Gordius was a Greek king. He tied an extremely complex knot, and an oracle prophesied that whoever untied it would rule all of Asia. Alexander the Great “untied” the knot simply by cutting through it with his sword.

A “Gordian knot” is any extremely complex problem, and “cutting the Gordian knot” refers to solving such a problem in a quick, decisive manner.

Examples

Each year, school counselors face the Gordian knot of scheduling classes so that teachers will have reasonable class sizes and students will have the opportunity to take the classes they need.

The councilwoman cut the Gordian knot of which of the two worthy programs would have to be eliminated when she proposed a money-saving strategy that would enable both programs to continue.
Item #13—Language and Idioms

Ivory Tower

A French poet, Alfred deVigny, was said to have **shut himself in an ivory tower so that he could compose his poems.** Furthermore “ivory towers” are mentioned in various 18th-century **fairy tales.** The term thus refers to a beautiful, **unreachable place.** It has **come to have negative connotations of being out of touch with reality.**

A person who is **secluded or protected from the real world and thus out of touch with reality** is said to be residing in an “ivory tower.”

**Examples**

The engineers feared that the leaders of the company, sitting in their ivory tower, did not understand why the people in the field needed increased resources to insure the new bridge truly would be safe.

In his ivory tower, the chancellor was unaware of the growing political protests occurring on the college campus. He still believed fraternity-house pranks were the most serious problem facing the university.

Item #14—Language and Idioms

All that Glitters is not Gold

This is a **proverb** derived from a Latin translation of Aristotle. The proverb read, “Do not hold as gold all that shines as gold.” In other words, just because something looks like gold, one should not assume that it actually is gold.

The message of the proverb is that something which **appears valuable on the outside, may in fact be less than valuable.** **Appearances can be deceptive.**

**Examples**

When I expressed envy for the superstar who seemed to have everything, my friend simply said, “Remember, all that glitters ....”

Pyrite, a yellow, metallic substance, is also known as “fool’s gold.” It provides a concrete example of the truth that “all that glitters is not gold.” Many people, not remembering this proverb, have been fooled into thinking they have found the real thing.
Sound and Fury

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, when Macbeth is informed that his wife has died, he speaks of the inevitability of death:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Thus, the phrase “sound and fury” refers to a great, tumultuous, and passionate uproar that actually is unimportant or meaningless.

Examples

In the 1980s, the media hyped the “great event” of Geraldo Rivera’s opening of Al Capone’s vault, and the network promoted the live broadcast of the event. When the vault was opened and found to be completely empty, it became obvious that all the build up was no more than sound and fury.

The “Y2K” hysteria leading up to the turn of the millennium turned out to be just so much sound and fury.

Icarus/Fly too Close to the Sun

In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, escaped from the island of Crete, by means of wings constructed by Daedalus. The wings were held on by means of wax, and although Daedalus had warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, Icarus did not heed the warning; the wax melted, and he fell to his death in the Aegean Sea.

To be “an Icarus” or to “fly too close to the sun” is to fail or be destroyed because of lack of caution or excessive ambition.

Examples

In Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451*, the protagonist, Montag, is finally turned in to the authorities for daring to keep books in his house. Beatty, the antagonist, comments: “‘Well,’ said Beatty, ‘now you did it. Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he’s burnt his damn wings, he wonders why.’”

When I told my roommate I thought I could attend the all-night party and still do well on my final exams the next day, he said, “I have just one word for you—Icarus.”
Bread and Circuses

This phrase was used by a writer during the time of the Roman Empire. He deplored the fact that the Imperial government was able to keep the populace content merely by distributing free food and providing entertaining spectacles, such as the fights in the Colosseum between people or between people and animals. The writer declared that it was shameful that people could be so easily kept in line simply by receiving ‘bread and circuses’ from the government.

This term refers to policies designed to prevent unrest by keeping people happy and thus deflecting concern about troubling issues.

Examples

The two candidates for student council president had differing approaches. While one tried to address problems such as crowded classrooms and lack of materials, the other distributed candy and proposed a weekly screening of entertaining videos during lunch. The first accused the second of a bread and circuses approach.

While many people welcomed the small tax rebate check distributed by the government, others mumbled that the gesture was mere bread and circuses.

Deus ex Machina

This phrase literally means “god from the machine”. In classical theater, the machina was a crane with a harness for an actor. The actor could thus be lowered from the ceiling and appear to be flying. In many classical plays, a god would unexpectedly appear, flying to earth to solve a seemingly hopeless problem or save the hero or heroine.

The term refers to any surprising turn of events that suddenly makes things turn out all right, especially in a literary work. This device is often considered to be an unsatisfying and overly convenient way to end a story.

Examples

In the melodrama, the hero and his family were about to be evicted when a stranger knocked on the door and informed them that a long-lost relative had left them a fortune. The appearance of this stranger was a modern-day deus ex machina.

Many readers feel cheated when writers save their hero or heroine at the last moment with the common deus ex machina in which the character awakens and realizes it was all “only a dream.”
Item #19—Language and Idioms

Tabula Rasa

This phrase is Latin for “blank slate.” The philosopher John Locke referred to the mind of a young person unaffected by experience as a tabula rasa.

The phrase refers to the idea that something or someone is entirely unmarked and uninfluenced.

Examples

My coach said that it was actually a good thing that I had never played golf; that way, I was a tabula rasa with no bad habits to break.

Ideally, a potential juror for a case should come in as a tabula rasa; however, in some high-profile cases, it is very difficult to find such jurors.

Item #20—Mythology and Legend

Tantalus

In Greek mythology, Tantalus was a king who offended the gods and was condemned to suffer eternal hunger and thirst in Hades. He stood in water up to his chin, but when he bent to drink, the waters receded. Beautiful, ripe fruit hung overhead, but each time he reached for a piece, the wind blew the boughs out of his reach.

To be “tantalized” or to be like Tantalus, is to be offered something desirable which is then withheld.

Examples

After being nominated for an Emmy® Award numerous times and always seeing the award presented to someone else, the actress began to feel like Tantalus.

The poor peasants were tantalized by the aromas drifting down the street from the palace banquet.
Item #21—Language and Idioms

NIMBY

This is an acronym for “Not In My Back Yard.”

The term refers to the idea that, while people may be aware of the necessity of some unpleasant realities, such as prisons, landfills, or chemical plants, they insist that these places be located away from where they live.

Examples

The committee was astonished that while many of the people in the neighborhood contributed generously to causes involving the handicapped, when a group home for handicapped individuals was proposed in the area, the NIMBY attitude took effect immediately.

The company finally abandoned entirely its plans to build a new superstore in the city because every site they proposed was met with a firm statement of NIMBY from residents who would be affected by the increased traffic the store would bring.

Item #22—History, Culture, Ideas

Waterloo

In 1815, the Battle of Waterloo was fought near the village of Waterloo, which is now in Belgium. This was the final battle in the Napoleonic wars, the battle in which Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated.

To meet one’s Waterloo is to suffer an ultimate, decisive defeat.

Examples

My grade in history was on the borderline, and when I looked at the questions on the final exam, I knew I had met my Waterloo and would be repeating the class the following semester.

Although he had had a stellar boxing career, when the champion was knocked out by a second-rate fighter in the second round, he knew he had met his Waterloo, and he announced his retirement the next day.
The Emperor’s New Clothes

In Hans Christian Andersen’s story, an emperor hires two tailors, who promise to make him a beautiful new set of clothes that are unique in that they are invisible to a person who is stupid or unfit for office. When the two swindlers “show” the emperor the new clothes, he pretends to admire them, fearing he will be revealed to be unfit for office. The emperor “wears” his new clothes in a grand parade for the whole town, and no one will admit they cannot see the “clothes.” Finally, a small child shouts out the truth that the emperor is, in fact, naked.

The phrase “Emperor’s New Clothes” is often used in the context of someone, like the small child, pointing out the falseness or pretentiousness of something, especially when others are afraid to admit the truth.

Examples

It seemed that everyone was raving about the supposedly “brilliant” film that was nearly impossible to understand until finally one critic declared that all the admiration for such a pretentious, pointless movie was a case of the Emperor’s New Clothes.

When we first met Peter, he impressed us with stories of his travels around the world and his acquaintance with several famous people. We later realized that the emperor had no clothes; Peter had never been more than a hundred miles from his hometown and had never met a celebrity in his life.

Left-handed Compliment

In language, the left hand is often associated with something negative. In fact, some of the dictionary definitions of “left-handed” include awkward, clumsy, or of doubtful sincerity. In heraldry, the left-hand side of a shield is called the sinister side.

A left-handed compliment is one that, despite being a compliment, is insulting or rude in some way.

Examples

You throw pretty well for a girl.

I really like your shoes. I remember when those were in style a couple of years ago.
Item #25—The Bible

Golden Calf

In the Book of Exodus, Moses is leading his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. While Moses is up on Mt. Sinai receiving the ten commandments from God, the people melt down their jewelry and ornaments and make a calf out of the gold, and they begin to worship this calf. Moses is angered when he returns to see the people worshipping an idol, and he breaks the stone tablets on which the commandments were written.

A “golden calf” is an idol or any object, especially a material object, that is worshipped even though it is not worthy of worship.

Examples

In their relentless pursuit of their idea of “success,” people who worship the golden calf of financial wealth often miss out on the pleasure of spending time with friends or family.

For Richard, the car he wanted became a golden calf. He thought of little else but possessing such a beautiful automobile.

Item #26—Mythology and Legend

Sword of Damocles

According to legend, Damocles was a courtier of a Greek king, and Damocles constantly flattered the king by speaking of what a wonderful life the king led. Tired of the flattery, the king held a banquet, and Damocles was seated in the king’s own chair under a sword that was suspended from the ceiling by a single thread. The king wanted Damocles to experience what it really felt like to be king: along with the privileges of kingship, the king was always aware of impending dangers and thus was never entirely at ease.

The phrase “sword of Damocles” refers to an awareness of impending or imminent danger.

Examples

Although Constance enjoyed her job at the factory, she and her co-workers knew that the sword of Damocles could fall at any minute and they would be laid off because of budget problems.

His father’s return from work was a sword of Damocles for Lewis because Lewis knew he would have to explain the new dent in his father’s car.
Svengali

Svengali is the name of a character in *Trilby*, a novel by George du Maurier. Svengali is a singing master who teaches Trilby to sing. He exercises absolute control over her, and when he dies, Trilby is no longer able to sing.

A “Svengali” is a person who exercises excessive control or influence over another person.

Examples

Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* exercises Svengali-like control over Eliza Doolittle. He controls the way she dresses, the way she speaks, and virtually every other aspect of her life in his campaign to change a Cockney flower girl into an English society lady.

In hopes of seeing their children become star athletes, some parents practically become Svengalis, directing the children’s schedules, diets, and activities down to the last detail.

Non Sequitur

In Latin, *non sequitur* means “It does not follow.”

The phrase can refer to a statement that is unrelated to what has been said before. In logic a *non sequitur* is a conclusion that does not logically follow from the premises.

Examples

In the middle of a lively discussion of the upcoming presidential election, my sister blurted out the fact that we were soon going to be getting a new kitten. This was a complete *non sequitur*, but it was understandable since she is only three years old.

Given the premises that all dogs have tails and that Fluffy has a tail, it would be a *non sequitur* to conclude that Fluffy therefore must be a dog. Fluffy could just as easily be a cat or any other tailed animal.
White Elephant

White, or albino, elephants, do occur from time to time in India, Asia, and Africa. Because of their rarity, these elephants are considered special and are not subject to being beasts of burden and toil as other elephants are. According to an old legend, in Siam (now Thailand), these white elephants were considered so valuable that any white elephants that were born automatically became the property of the King of Siam. The king soon realized that feeding such a huge animal was very costly, especially since the elephant did not bring in income by working like other elephants. Thus, the king began giving white elephants as gifts to those who displeased him. The burden of feeding the animals without being able to get any work from them quickly brought financial ruin to the recipient of the “gift.”

Today, a “white elephant” is an object that has no use to its owner and may even represent a financial burden or an inconvenience.

Examples

The house I inherited from my grandparents turned out to be a white elephant. Although it was paid for, the property taxes were astronomical, and the old house was in constant need of maintenance and costly repairs.

We had a garage sale in hopes of getting rid of some of our possessions that had become nothing but white elephants.

Item #30—History, Culture, and Ideas

Fiddle While Rome Burns

During the reign of the Roman emperor Nero, a fire consumed half of Rome. Legend has it that Nero showed complete indifference, playing his violin, or fiddle, during the emergency. Thus, Nero showed his complete disregard for the hardship suffered by the people he governed.

To “fiddle while Rome burns” is to display indifference in the midst of an emergency or disaster.

Examples

After the tornado devastated a neighboring community, the town decided to postpone its annual parade. The town leaders did not want it to appear that they were fiddling while Rome burns rather than showing concern for their neighbors.

Unfortunately, it is often easier for those in Congress to fiddle while Rome burns than it is to acknowledge and address serious issues such as budget deficits, growing crime rates, and threats to the environment.
In Medias Res

This is a Latin phrase, which literally means “into the middle of things.” One of the standard epic conventions is that the epic begins in the middle of the action. Events that occurred earlier are described later in the epic.

The phrase can refer to anything that begins abruptly, in the middle of the action, or it can be used in its literal sense: into the middle of things.

Examples

I was unable to understand what my friends were talking about because I walked into the conversation in medias res.

Like most epics, The Odyssey begins in medias res; Odysseus is almost home when the epic opens, but the reader or listener learns of his earlier adventures as the epic progresses.

Loaves and Fishes

In several of the gospels, the story is told of Jesus preaching to a crowd of thousands. When the people became hungry, all the food to be found was five loaves and two fish. Jesus had these brought to him and blessed the food. His disciples distributed bread and fish to the entire crowd, and there was still food left over after everyone had been fed.

The phrase “loaves and fishes” refers to an almost miraculous abundance in the face of seeming scarcity.

Examples

When the attendance at the party for the children living in the shelter was almost double what we had anticipated, we almost panicked. However, it was a case of loaves and fishes; every child was thrilled with his or her treats.

When I think back to my struggling student days with my extremely tight budget, I realize that the fact that I didn’t starve is a real case of loaves and fishes.
Item #33—Language and Idioms

*Magnum Opus*

This phrase is *Latin* for “great work.” Incidentally, the plural of *opus* is *opus.*

This phrase usually refers to the greatest work produced by a writer, composer, or other artist.

*Examples*

Many people consider “Starry Night” to be Vincent Van Gogh’s *magnum opus.*

In E. B. White’s novel *Charlotte’s Web,* Charlotte refers to her web, in which she weaves tributes to Wilbur the pig, as “my *magnum opus.*”

Item #34—Mythology and Legend

*Janus*

Janus was the Roman god of gates and doorways. Thus, he was associated with entrances and beginnings. Our month of *January* is named for Janus. He was usually depicted with two faces, one looking forward into the future, and one looking backward at the past.

Calling someone a “Janus” can be either a positive or a negative statement. It can refer to the wisdom and knowledge of a person who sees everything, or to the two-faced, hypocritical nature of a person who presents two different appearances, depending on the circumstances. Thus, Janus represents duality in several ways.

*Examples*

One investment company calls itself “Janus,” implying that their firm has the big picture on investments, learning from the past and projecting the future of the markets.

 Appropriately, Shakespeare’s villainous, hypocritical character Iago swears by the god Janus. Iago pretends to be Othello’s friend, but he is determined to bring about Othello’s ruin.
Item #35—Language and Idioms

A Chip on One’s Shoulder

In earlier times young boys would place a wood chip on their shoulders and dare anyone to knock it off and thus start a fight. This was a way of showing how tough they were.

A person with a chip on his or her shoulder is one who is inclined to be resentful or who seems to be looking for an excuse to fight.

Examples

Ever since he was passed over for the promotion, James walks around the office with a chip on his shoulder. Everyone is afraid to speak to him because he is offended by almost anything anyone says.

Talk about having a chip on her shoulder! I told Connie her hair looked really nice today, and she said, “Are you saying it usually looks terrible?”

Item #36—History, Culture, and Ideas

Noble Savage

This is a concept in Western philosophy, particularly associated with the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that people are born good and innocent and that influences from civilization cause them to lose this goodness and innocence.

A “noble savage” is a person who has not been corrupted by society or civilization.

Examples

In his campaign for political office, the candidate attempted to convince voters that he was a virtual noble savage, an outsider who would not play the political games of those who had been in Washington for a long time.

In Brave New World, John is portrayed as the noble savage; he is brought to London, where is repulsed by the impersonal, technological, amoral society in which he finds himself.
Burning Bush

In the Book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses from a miraculous burning bush, a bush that burns but is not consumed. He commands Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh free the Israelites, and he tells Moses to lead the people to the Promised Land.

A “burning bush” refers to a medium through which the voice of absolute authority speaks.

Examples

When it comes to investing my money, I consider him to be the burning bush. Everything he has ever advised me to do has paid off beyond my wildest dreams.

When I continued to pester my mother about allowing me to go to the beach with my friends during spring break, she told me the answer was “no” unless she heard from a burning bush that she should allow me to go.

Narcissus/narcissism

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man of extraordinary beauty. He cruelly rejected many admirers, including the nymph Echo. One day, as he bent to drink from a pool, Narcissus saw his own reflection, and immediately fell in love with it. In some versions of the story, Narcissus tried to embrace his reflection, fell into the pool, and drowned. In others, unable to tear himself away from his reflection, he wasted away and died. In either case, his obsession with his own beauty led to his death.

The term “narcissism” is derived from the story of Narcissus. It refers to obsessive focus on oneself, particularly one’s physical appearance.

Examples

I felt the feeling Janet was a bit narcissistic when I noticed that she had at least three mirrors hanging in every room of her house.

When Michael asked me why I accused him of narcissism, I told him it was because he has a way of turning the focus of every conversation toward himself.
Scheherazade

Scheherazade is the narrator of *Arabian Nights*, also referred to as *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folktales. According to legend, the Arabian King Shahriyar, angered when he discovers his first wife’s infidelity, vows to marry a new wife every day and execute her the morning after their wedding night. When it is Scheherazade’s turn to be the bride, she tells her new husband a story on their wedding night, but she ends the story at the most critical point, promising to continue the story the next night. Scheherazade’s cunning and her fascinating storytelling keep her alive for a thousand and one nights, by which time the king has fallen in love with her and cancels his vow.

A person who is an excellent storyteller, especially one who is able to keep an audience in suspense, may be compared to Scheherazade.

**Examples**

The writers of that soap opera are modern-day Scheherazades. Although I keep intending to spend my afternoons doing something more useful, each day’s episode compels me to watch again the next day to see what happens.

Recounting bits of her fascinating life story each day while the biographer took notes, the actress felt like Scheherazade.

Skeleton in the Closet

Long after a person has died and the body has decomposed, the skeleton remains. Skeletons can be unpleasant or frightening to look at.

The phrase “skeleton in one’s closet” refers to unpleasant or embarrassing things about a person that he or she would prefer to keep hidden from others, just as one would hide a skeleton away from the view of visitors.

**Examples**

Anyone who runs for public office should realize that any skeletons in his or her closet are bound to be discovered and exposed by the media.

For years he kept his inability to read a secret, considering it to be a shameful skeleton in his closet. However, at the age of twenty-five, he confided in his friends, returned to school, and quickly became an avid reader.
Fifteen Minutes of Fame

Andy Warhol, a twentieth-century American artist most famous for his pop-art images of Campbell's soup cans and Marilyn Monroe, commented on the explosion of media coverage by saying, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.

Today, when someone receives a great deal of media attention for something fairly trivial, he or she is said to be experiencing his/her “fifteen minutes of fame.”

Examples

The so-called “old friend” who revealed the scandalous information about the celebrity's early years got his wish; he had his fifteen minutes of fame, appearing on talk shows and in tabloids. Now, everyone just hopes he will go away.

Janelle's friends were thrilled when she became a Jeopardy champion, and they told her she was now a national celebrity. She modestly replied, “Don't be silly; it's just my fifteen minutes of fame.”

Let the Cat out of the Bag/ Buy a Pig in a Poke

In medieval times, farmers often took piglets to market in a bag known as a "poke." Sometimes, an unscrupulous farmer would place a cat in the bag instead of a pig. If the cat managed to escape, the farmer's secret would be revealed to the buyer. Often buyers would not look in the bag to be sure they were not being swindled; they would simply pay for the pig in a poke.

We use the phrase "letting the cat out of the bag" to refer to a secret's being revealed. The phrase "buying a pig in a poke" describes buying something sight unseen. Buying a pig in a poke is considered unwise because of the risks involved.

Examples

George and Carla had kept their engagement secret for several weeks, but as soon as Carla showed up at the party wearing a new diamond ring on her left hand, the cat was out of the bag.

Since the political candidate had absolutely no previous experience in government, the voters were wary about voting for her; they didn't want to buy a pig in a poke and then discover that they had elected an incompetent leader.
Lot's Wife/Pillar of Salt

According to the Book of Genesis, God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was given time to escape with his family before the destruction. God commanded Lot and his family not to look back as they fled. Lot's wife disobeyed and looked back, and she was immediately turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for her disobedience.

An allusion to Lot's wife or to a pillar of salt is usually a reference to someone who unwisely chooses to look back once he or she has begun on a course of action or to someone who disobeys an explicit rule or command.

Examples

You have brooded over that one bad play you made in last week's game so constantly I'm surprised you haven't become a pillar of salt.

When I finally worked up the courage to quit my job, I promised myself that, come what may, I would not be Lot's wife and waste my time looking back.

Cassandra

In Greek mythology, Cassandra, the daughter of a Trojan king, was loved by Apollo, who gave her the gift of prophecy. When Cassandra later angered Apollo, he altered the gift so that her prophecies, while true, would not be believed. Thus, her accurate warnings to the Trojans were disregarded, and disaster befell them.

Today, a "Cassandra" refers to someone who predicts disasters or negative results, especially to someone whose predictions are disregarded.

Examples

He was a modern-day Cassandra, warning the city council that the proposed development would have dire environmental consequences. Only years later did people realize he had been absolutely correct.

I finally stopped asking my friend Celia for advice when I had a decision to make. She is such a Cassandra; if I listened to her, I would never take any risks at all because of her constant predictions of doom.
Catch-22

This phrase comes from a novel by Joseph Heller. *Catch-22* is set on a U.S. Army Air Force base in World War II. The "catch-22" refers to a regulation that states an airman's request to be relieved from flight duty can be granted only if he is judged to be insane. However, anyone who does not want to fly dangerous missions is obviously sane. Thus, there is no way to avoid flying the missions.

A "catch-22" has come to mean an *absurd, no-win situation*.

Examples

No one will give me a credit card or a loan because I have no credit history; however, I cannot establish a credit history until someone gives me a credit card or a loan—a true catch-22.

The boss created a catch-22 for her employees: If they remembered her birthday with gifts and cards, she suspected them of ulterior motives. However, if they did not acknowledge her birthday with gifts and cards, she thought they were unappreciative.
**QUIZ #1**

*AN ALLUSION A DAY VOLUME I*

Match the item in the left-hand column with the associated background information in the second column and the definition in the third column.

| 1. crossing the | A. Mythological Sea Creatures |
| Rubicon        | AA. insistence on repayment |
| 2. once in a blue moon | B. Sermon on the Mount |
| 3. Achilles heel | C. Sbylock |
| 4. Sirens      | D. English Common Law |
| 5. All that glitters is not gold | E. Macbeth |
| 6. thirty pieces of silver | F. Alexander the Great |
| 7. Mrs. Grundy | G. Julius Caesar |
| 8. read the riot act | H. approximately every three years |
| 9. sacred cow | I. Aristotle |
| 10. ivory tower | J. Judas |
| 11. sound and fury | K. fairy tales |
| 12. pears before swine | L. Speed the Plough |
| 13. crocodile tears | M. River Styx |
| 14. Gordian knot | N. Hinduism |
| 15. pound of flesh | O. before devouring prey |

**QUIZ #2**

*AN ALLUSION A DAY VOLUME I*

Match the item in the left-hand column with the associated background information in the second column and the definition in the third column.

| 1. *deus ex machina* | A. does not follow |
| 2. Tantalus | B. doubtful sincerity |
| 3. Emperor's new clothes | C. Moses |
| 4. bread and circuses | D. John Locke |
| 5. left-handed compliment | E. entertaining spectacles |
| 6. Svengali | F. Nero |
| 7. white elephant | G. King's banquet |
| 8. non sequitur | H. acronym |
| 9. Icarus | I. Napoleon |
| 10. *tabula rasa* | J. Island of Crete |
| 11. sword of Damocles | K. Hans Christian Andersen |
| 12. Waterloo | L. King of Siam |
| 13. fiddle while Rome burns | M. classical theater |
| 14. golden calf | N. Hades |
| 15. NIMBY | O. *Trilby* |

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Match the item in the left-hand column with the associated background information in the second column and the definition in the third column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Background Information</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. leaves &amp; fishes</td>
<td>A. epic convention</td>
<td>AA. duality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. chip on one's shoulder</td>
<td>B. pigs to market</td>
<td>BB. focus on oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Scheherazade</td>
<td>C. Roman god</td>
<td>CC. uncorrupted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lot's wife</td>
<td>D. unpleasant to look at</td>
<td>DD. voice of authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. burning bush</td>
<td>E. singular of opera</td>
<td>EE. media attention to trivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>in medias res</em></td>
<td>F. <em>Arabian Nights</em></td>
<td>FF. predicting disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Narcissus</td>
<td>G. boys' dare</td>
<td>GG. miraculous abundance</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Janus</td>
<td>H. Sodom and Gomorrah</td>
<td>HH. excellent storyteller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 15 minutes of fame</td>
<td>I. Moses</td>
<td>II. begins in the middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. noble savage</td>
<td>J. reflection in a pool</td>
<td>JJ. hidden from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <em>magnum opus</em></td>
<td>K. Joseph Heller</td>
<td>KK. resentful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. skeleton in the closet</td>
<td>L. the gospels</td>
<td>LL. no-win situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. let the cat out of the bag</td>
<td>M. Rousseau</td>
<td>MM. looking back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. catch-22</td>
<td>N. gifted by Apollo</td>
<td>NN. revealing a secret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Cassandra</td>
<td>O. Andy Warhol</td>
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| Name | QUIZ #1 ANSWER SHEET 
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