

Vocabulary Improvement: Learn Stories Behind Words

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Many English words come from the names of people, places and events. Learning the stories behind these words is a pleasant and painless way to enlarge your vocabulary. Knowing the stories will help you keep the words anchored in your memory.

1. Tantalize

According to ancient myth, Tantalus was a king whose misbehavior was cruelly punished by the gods. He was forced to stand in a pool of water that dried up whenever he tried to drink. Over his head was a luscious bunch of grapes that rose higher whenever he tried to eat. Thirsty and starving, Tantalus always had food he couldn't reach and water he couldn't drink. No wonder, then, that being tantalized by something means we are teased and tormented by what is just out of our reach.

Sample sentence: Tantalized by the smell of frying bacon, the dog stared hungrily at the stove.

2. Nemesis

The ancient myths also tell of Nemesis, a goddess whose job it was to hunt down and punish those guilty of excessive pride or of disrespect to the gods. No matter, where they hid, her victims could not escape their punishment. When we say today that someone or something is our nemesis, we mean that the person or thing is bound to bring about our downfall or failure.

Sample sentence: In Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, Iago is Othello's nemesis; motivated by envy and hatred, Iago is determined to destroy the man he claims to love above all others.

3. Maelstrom

The Maelstrom is a huge and powerful whirl pool found off the western coast of Norway. Famous for whirling force and speed that swallow up boats and people, the Maelstrom eventually gave its name to situations that pull us into disorder and confusion.

Sample sentence: Unused to the political maelstrom that was Washington, the young senator found himself struggling to hold on to his integrity along with his career.

4. Bedlam

London's St. Mary of Bethlehem's hospital is currently known for its excellent medical treatment. But in its early days, the hospital was famous for its cruelty to

patients, many of whom wandered about in chains. Rumors of what was done to those who went through the hospital's doors were widely circulated. As rumors spread from person to person, the hospital's name was mispronounced so that "Bethlehem" became "bedlam." In time, the word "bedlam" came to mean a place where wild disorder ruled.

Sample sentence: The substitute teacher left the room for only a few brief moments, but when she returned, the classroom was complete bedlam with some children standing on their desks while others marched around wearing their chairs or books on top of their heads.

5. Tawdry

England's princess Audrey dedicated her life to God and swore off all worldly luxuries. Wearing chains around her neck was her one vanity. When Audrey died, those who mourned her wore pieces of lace around their necks in her honor. The pieces of lace were so popular that cheaper versions, called "St. Audrey's lace," started turning up in local markets. Like the name "Bethlehem" became the word "bedlam," the name of the lace necklaces was mispronounced and "St. Audrey's lace" became "tawdry lace." With the passage of time, the word "tawdry" was used to refer to anything cheap and poorly made.

Sample sentence: In the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the desperate heroine, Blanche Dubois, tries to pretend that the tawdry apartment she shares with her sister is only temporary.