

From the Stacks
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Ever found yourself in a no-win situation? Have you been completely hamstrung by bureaucracy? You may have been hit with a fee for not having enough money, or perhaps you could not get a job without experience, or even denied an apartment because you lacked a current address. You have probably called these scenarios a "catch-22"! This is the title of Joseph Heller's 1961 novel. It is fascinating how many words and idioms become part of our everyday language. How often do we really know their origins?

This infamous novel, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, whose title has become shorthand for any no-win dilemma, is more than 50 years old, but its humor still holds up. Set in Italy during the Second World War, it follows pilot Yossarian, who is understandably frustrated that so many people he is never met are trying to kill him. There is no clear escape from the ever-growing list of dangerous missions he must fly before finishing his service. It is a thorny situation: willingly facing danger is considered insane and potentially grounds for discharge, but if he wants out, that proves he is sane, which means he has fit to fly.

When someone is described as "Jekyll and Hyde," we instantly get it: they have two wildly different personalities. One is typically gentle, refined, and well-behaved, while the other is hedonistic, violent, and hostile. This vivid expression comes straight from the plot of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In the story, the respected Dr. Jekyll invents a scientific process that transforms him into the monstrous Mr. Hyde. This allows him to indulge his darkest desires without fear of ruining his reputation.

Many terms and phrases from George Orwell's *1984* are getting a lot of attention lately, as some of his predictions seem to be coming eerily true. We all understand the concept of "Big Brother", the totalitarian dictator who exerts complete control by constantly watching society. Orwell also gave us "Newspeak," a fictional language that introduced terms like "doublethink" which is the ability to simultaneously hold two contradictory ideas. It is clear we owe a great deal to his insightful imagination!

What do you call a tropical nation with an unstable government and an economy overly dependent on a single export? A "banana republic," of course! This term comes from the 1904 novel *Cabbages and Kings*, which is set in the fictional Central American "Republic of Anchuria." The republic's main export was bananas. Interestingly, the title *Cabbages and Kings* itself was inspired by "The Walrus and The Carpenter," a poem found in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Speaking of which....

Among a host of memorable phrases from Lewis Carroll—like "through the looking glass," "down the rabbit hole," "Cheshire cat smile," and "off with her head"—we find "mad as a hatter." This idiom, meaning profoundly eccentric or, less politely, seriously bonkers, describes someone behaving erratically, speaking nonsense, or displaying any unusual conduct. Carroll did not invent the concept, but he drew upon the then-prevalent phenomenon of hat manufacturers suffering from mercury poisoning, a genuine occupational hazard of the time. By incorporating this idea, he created his iconic character, The Mad Hatter, and in doing so, firmly cemented the phrase into the English language.

Having studied Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* an entire semester of college, I marveled at the imagery and the beautiful language. I laughed at the delusional Don Quixote who is convinced he is a valiant knight and charges against windmills he believes to be monstrous giants. Two idioms emerge from this scene "tilting the windmills" and "facing the giants"! Yet, my favorite is "the pot calling the kettle black". A character criticizes another for a flaw they clearly share. Both phrases highlight the novel's profound observations on delusion, self-deception, and the often-ironic nature of human judgment.