

According to the Random House Dictionary, an *allusion* is "a passing or casual reference; an incidental mention of something, either directly or by implication." It is a common practice in literature to make allusions to a variety of sources. The following lists describe some common allusions to Greek or Roman mythology, the Bible, other works of literature, and history. These resources will help you determine why a character is described as having an "[Achilles heel](#)," the "[patience of Job](#)," or an "[Oedipus complex](#)." But hopefully not all three!

Mythological Allusions

- **Achilles heel:** In Greek mythology, the warrior [Achilles](#) was made invulnerable as a baby by being dipped into the River Styx. Only his heel—the place he was held by when being dipped—was left unprotected, which led to his downfall when it was struck by an arrow. An Achilles heel refers to a person's vulnerability or fatal flaw. *He was a shrewd business man and investor, but his Achilles heel was gambling.*
- **Argus-eyed:** According to the Greek legend, [Argus](#) had 100 eyes. The Greek queen Juno had him spy on her wayward husband, Zeus. Argus-eyed refers to jealous watchfulness. *"Why so Argus-eyed, my love?" cried Bill. "I swear I've been at the office this whole time!"*
- **Bacchanalian:** [Bacchanalia](#) was a Roman festival in honor of [Bacchus](#), the god of wine (called Dionysius in Greek mythology). The holiday was eventually banned due to drunken and libertine excess. Something described as Bacchanalian is similarly decadent and uninhibited. *What started out as a genteel and subdued dinner party degenerated into Bacchanalian abandon as the hours wore on.*
- **Cupid:** Cupid, or Amor, was the Roman god of love, who was also called [Eros](#) by the Greeks. He was usually depicted as a young winged boy with a bow and arrow. To play Cupid is to be a matchmaker, while someone who suddenly falls in love is said to have been struck by Cupid's arrow. *Diane knew Sam had asked her not to get involved in his personal life, but she couldn't resist the urge to play Cupid and set him up with Rebecca.*
- **Gordian knot:** According to Greek legend, [King Gordius](#) tied a wagon to a column with an extremely complex and intricate knot, which many tried and failed to undo. An oracle declared that whoever could untie the knot would rule the world. With a single stroke of his sword, [Alexander the Great](#) cut the knot in two, and went on to rule Asia. A Gordian knot is an intractable problem, and to cut the Gordian knot is to resolve a difficult problem with swift and bold action. *The president believed he could cut through the Gordian knot of growing civil unrest by sending in the national guard with tear gas.*
- **Herculean:** [Hercules](#) was a hero in Greek mythology who was renowned for his strength and courage. He is best known for completing his 12 labors, which included killing or capturing legendary creatures, gaining various items, and diverting a river to clean out the stables of Augeas. A Herculean feat is one very hard to perform, especially one requiring great strength. *With a Herculean effort, Valjean lifted the cart off the man trapped underneath.*
- **Nemesis:** [Nemesis](#) was a Greek goddess of retribution, the incarnation of the gods' revenge for violating their laws. As the gods' retribution could not be avoided, a nemesis is not only an agent of punishment, but any challenge or opponent that a person is unable to defeat. *He used all his willpower to stay on the diet, but the doughnut shop next door proved to be his nemesis.*
- **Pandora's box:** [Pandora](#), according to Greek mythology, was the first woman on earth. Created by Zeus in revenge for Prometheus's stealing of fire, she was given a box that she was told not to open. Either she or her husband Epimetheus—tellings diverge on that point—opened the box, allowing all manner of evils to escape and plague the world. A Pandora's box is anything that, upon investigation, leads to extensive and unexpected troubles. *The investigation of drug use among the athletes opened a Pandora's Box implicating half the league.*
- **Promethean:** In Greek mythology, [Prometheus](#) defied Zeus, stealing fire from the heavens and giving it to the human race. His name has become associated with bold originality and creativity.

Although religious authorities and moralists objected to the new procedure, the Promethean scientists would not be denied.

- **Protean:** [Proteus](#) was a Greek god who had the ability to change his shape. Someone or something that easily adapts to changing situations or roles by changing itself is described as protean. *The senator's protean policies always mirrored the whims of his electorate.*

Biblical Allusions

- **Antedeluvian:** Antedeluvian is Latin for “before the flood,” referring to [the flood](#) Noah rode out in [Genesis](#). Something very old or outdated is sometimes exaggeratedly called antedeluvian. *The professor's antedeluvian beliefs made him ill-suited for classroom teaching.*
- **Goliath:** [Goliath](#) was a giant warrior—more than nine feet tall—who was slain by David in [1 Samuel](#). In modern usage, both giants and very large or powerful people or things are called goliaths. *Small bookstores can't compete against national chain goliaths.*
- **Good Samaritan:** The book of Luke recounts [the parable of the Good Samaritan](#), in which a man is attacked by thieves and left at the side of the road. A passing Samaritan binds his wounds, takes him to an inn, and cares for him. A good Samaritan now refers to anyone who freely helps others in their time of need. *If not for the good Samaritan who jump-started her car, she might still be stuck on the side of the Interstate.*
- **Job's comforters:** In [the book of Job](#), the title personage was tested with a series of misfortunes. At several points, friends came to “comfort” Job by claiming that his travails were the just consequences of his sins, and that it was therefore unseemly to complain about them. A Job's comforter has come to mean a person who tries to console another but instead has the opposite effect. *The Job's comforters told him it was just as well he wasn't invited to the party; he didn't make nearly enough money to interest any of the women there.*
- **Jonah:** [Jonah](#) was a prophet who defied God's command to deliver a warning to the city of Nineveh, instead fleeing on a ship to Tarshish. A storm was sent to punish him, and would not relent—imperiling everyone on the ship—until Jonah was thrown off. A person or thing that brings bad luck is called a Jonah. *I'm not going to carpool with that Jonah. Every vehicle she gets into ends up in an accident.*
- **Judas:** [Judas Iscariot](#) betrayed Jesus Christ, identifying him to soldiers by [giving him a kiss](#). Somebody who betrays their friend is called a Judas. *I'm not going to leave that Judas alone with my boss while we're competing for the same promotion.*
- **Killing the fatted calf:** See the **prodigal son**. The prodigal son's father calls for a fatted calf to be killed for the welcoming feast. Killing the fatted calf is now used as an expression for sparing no expense on a celebration. *He killed the fatted calf for the lavish anniversary party.*
- **Kiss of death:** See **Judas**. A kiss of death is an act of betrayal, or any action which causes another's downfall. *The endorsement by a prominent neo-Nazi was the kiss of death to her senatorial campaign.*
- **Patience of Job:** [Job](#), in the book named for him, was faced by a series of unbearable misfortunes. While this caused him to lament his fate, he nevertheless never wavered in his faith in God. Somebody with a seemingly infinite store of patience is said to have the patience of Job. *Dealing with the crotchety old man every day for five years required the patience of Job.*
- **Prodigal son:** The book of Luke recounts [the parable of the prodigal son](#), in which a son leaves home to fritter away his money on a hedonistic lifestyle, only to end up destitute. The son crawls home, filled with shame and remorse, upon which his father welcomes him with open arms. Somebody who leaves home to lead a dissolute life and regretfully returns home is called a prodigal son. *After abandoning football for a semester of drunken frat parties, Northwestern's prodigal son Rick Hammond came back to lead the team to victory in the playoffs.*
- **Thirty pieces of silver:** Judas was paid [thirty pieces of silver](#) for betraying Jesus. Payment for any treacherous act is now referred to as thirty pieces of silver, or [blood money](#). *Jim got a*

generous package of stock options for helping depose his partner as CEO, but the thirty pieces of silver didn't keep his conscience from gnawing at him.

Literary Allusions

- **Boswell:** [James Boswell](#) (1740–95) is best known for his 1791 book *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, considered by many to be the greatest English-language biography ever written. His name is now applied to any devoted biographer. *In one story, Sherlock Holmes refers to Watson as his Boswell.*
- **Lolita:** In [Vladimir Nabokov's](#) 1955 novel, *Lolita*, the adult narrator is infatuated by the 12-year-old title character. While the original Lolita was described as a rather plain child who was unfortunate in becoming an object of obsession, the name has become a term for a sexually precocious adolescent girl. *The tabloids called Amy Fisher the "Long Island Lolita."*
- **Milquetoast:** *The Timid Soul*, a one-panel newspaper comic by H.T. Webster, made its first appearance in the *New York World* in 1924. Its main character was a timid, soft-spoken, easily dominated man named Caspar Milquetoast. His name has come to be used for anybody who's a complete wimp. *His neighbor borrowed all his tools months ago, but that milquetoast is too timid to ask for them back.*
- **Oedipus complex:** In Greek legend—notably dramatized in *Oedipus Rex*, by the Greek playwright Sophocles—[Oedipus](#) unwittingly carries out his destiny of killing his father and marrying his mother. Sigmund Freud coined the term "[Oedipus complex](#)," referring to a stage in which someone is attracted to their parent of the opposite sex, and sees their parent of the same sex as a rival. (Usually, it refers to a son's desire toward his mother; a daughter's attraction to her father is sometimes called an [Electra](#) complex.) *The movie featured a mama's boy with an Oedipus complex who sought revenge on his no-good father.*
- **Peter Pan:** [Peter Pan](#), the protagonist of a 1904 play and 1911 book by J. M. Barrie, is famously a boy who refused to ever grow up. These days, an adult who acts immaturely is sometimes said to be suffering from "Peter Pan syndrome." *Let him fix his own cocoa; you don't need to indulge his Peter Pan syndrome by mothering him.*
- **Pollyanna:** The title character of *Pollyanna*, a 1913 novel by Eleanor Porter, was a poor girl faced with difficult obstacles who nevertheless managed to stay relentlessly upbeat. While the original Pollyanna was well aware of her challenges but chose to play the "Glad Game" of finding the silver lining in every dark cloud, the name is now applied to somebody who is blindly optimistic, or overly upbeat out of naïveté. *"She's such a Pollyanna," grumbled Mary Anne, "she thinks the IRS auditor is calling to make sure they don't owe her any money."*
- **Svengali:** *Trilby*, a 1894 novel by [George Du Maurier](#), features a hypnotist named Svengali who dominates the title character while making her a musical star. Somebody who controls somebody else's career for his own ends is now called a Svengali. *Some felt that the Svengali behind the reality TV show locked the winner into an unfairly restrictive contract.*

Historical Allusions

- **Benedict Arnold:** [Benedict Arnold](#) (1741–1801), was a successful general for the American colonies during the Revolutionary War before switching sides and fighting for the British. His name has become synonymous with "turncoat." *Everything was going well until that Benedict Arnold, Diane, gave our trade secrets to the competition.*
- **Bowlerize:** [Thomas Bowdler](#) (1754–1825) is best known as the editor of *The Family Shakespeare*, a popular edition in which "those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family." To bowdlerize is to remove potentially offensive

passages from a work of literature or drama. *A bowdlerized version of Sex and the City was created for syndication on broadcast TV.*

- **Boycott:** Captain Charles Cunningham [Boycott](#) was an English land agent in Ireland. In 1880, in the midst of controversy over the "[Irish Land Question](#)," he and his family were ostracized by the community. An organized refusal to deal with, or buy from, a given person or company is now referred to as a boycott. *The club decided to boycott any cosmetics company that tested products on animals.*
- **Casanova:** [Giovanni Giacomo Casanova](#) (1725–98) was a famous Venetian adventurer and writer who romanced well over a hundred women in the course of his travels. In modern parlance, a Casanova is a charismatic man with a reputation for having many romantic conquests. *I know he's a Casanova, but I can't resist those eyes.*
- **Donnybrook:** [Donnybrook](#) is the name of a village in Ireland that was home to an annual fair beginning in 1204. It became famous for drunken brawling, which led to the fair being permanently banned in 1855. A free-for-all brawl is now known as a donnybrook. *Nobody was sure how the donnybrook started, but it landed three partygoers in the hospital.*
- **Draconian:** A lawmaker in Athens in the 7th century B.C., [Draco's](#) legal code was unusually severe, meting out the death penalty for minor offenses. Laws are now referred to as Draconian when they're perceived as offering excessively harsh penalties. *The activists sought to change the Draconian jaywalking laws.*
- **Fiddling while Rome burns:** It is widely believed that the Roman emperor [Nero](#) displayed indifference during the 64 A.D. Great Fire that consumed much of Rome, even to the extent of fiddling merrily. As it happens, the fiddle hadn't been invented yet, and it's uncertain how Nero reacted, but such concerns have no effect on popular usage. To fiddle while Rome burns is to waste time on unimportant or self-indulgent matters during a time of crisis. *The city has its highest unemployment rate in decades, while the mayor attends upscale parties; she's fiddling while Rome burns.*
- **Pyrrhic victory:** [Pyrrhus](#) (c. 318 B.C.–272 B.C.), king of Epirus, won many battles but overextended himself. After defeating the Romans in 279 B.C. while sustaining very heavy losses, Pyrrhus declared "one more such victory and I am lost." A pyrrhic victory is a victory won at too great a cost. *In a Pyrrhic victory, he managed to grab the last muffin, but he lost the goodwill of his friends.*
- **Rich as Croesus:** [Croesus](#), king of Lydia until 547 B.C., was famous for his great wealth. Somebody said to be rich as Croesus is being described as extremely wealthy. *Bill Gates is as rich as Croesus!*
- **Sell down the river:** During the early- to mid- 19th century in the American South, slaves were transported down the Mississippi River for sale to plantations where the work was harder. To sell another person down the river is to betray him or her for one's own benefit. *The CEO sold his employees down the river by cutting their benefits while raising his own salary.*
- **Sybaritic:** The Greek city of [Sybaris](#) was founded in 820 B.C. and destroyed in 510 B.C. Along the way, it was inhabited by wealthy people, who were reputed to live in luxurious self-indulgence. Accordingly, a sybarite is somebody devoted to luxury and pleasure, and sybaritic is the adjectival form. *The sybaritic banquet included four kinds of caviar, foie gras, and a \$5,000 bottle of wine with each course.*
- **Waterloo:** The 1815 [Battle of Waterloo](#) was the final military action of French emperor [Napoleon](#), in his last attempt to keep power. His troops were crushed by a coalition of European forces, forcing him to abdicate and accept exile for the second—and final—time. Waterloo has become a term referring to a decisive, crushing defeat of any sort. *She met her Waterloo at the Iowa caucus.*