

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!

Argus

-eyed: According to the Greek legend, [Argus](#)

*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.*

**Antedeluvian:**

*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.*

**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. S

[Oedipus complex](#)

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 *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

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.*

**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 *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*, e omitted which cannot

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 [Irish Land Question](#), 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,

peace costs.