IDIOMS FROM CLASSICAL ENGLISH PROSE

Ildikó Gy. Zoltán, Assist, PhD Candidate, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureș

Abstract: Popular novels and stories, especially those considered the classics of English literature, have been widely read and also persistently taught in school for many years, having thus become part of what is considered to be "general culture". Some of their lines started a separate life at some point and have become idioms; some of their characters have turned into symbols for certain types of human behaviour. Tracing these to their original context might shed light on how they came to have their present meaning.

Keywords: idiom, expression, meaning, novel, origin.

Compared to poetry or drama, the novel is a relatively recent literary genre in the modern sense of the word. Its roots, however, reach back much further than the conventional (and rather narrow) definitions would have us believe.

The term 'novel' is defined by dictionaries as a long narrative (normally in prose) in which the characters and events are imaginary. For most people today it means a book-length work of fiction, and can broadly refer to a great variety of these: historical novels, adventure tales, family sagas, mysteries, comic fantasy, detective stories, thrillers, science fiction, romance novels and anything else in between.

Ever since the advent of the printed word and the subsequent spread of literacy, and especially in the last few centuries the novel has enjoyed an ever increasing popularity. Being widely read and frequently cited, some of the lines and phrases from these literary works entered the main flow of language and became idioms and expression; some of their characters have turned into symbols for certain types of human behaviour.

The present paper traces a handful of these back to their original context in order to better understand how they acquired their present meaning as idioms in the English language: rediscovering their source might prove an interesting 'expedition' both into linguistics and into literary history.

*a man **Friday*** = a loyal and hard-working servant or helper

The original Friday is Crusoe's servant or 'man' in Daniel Defoe's *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The term became so popular that the female variant has also been coined:

*a girl **Friday*** = a girl or young woman who is employed to do various duties, often including those of a secretary in the offices of a business company

*a **Scrooge*** = a person who spends as little money as possible and who does not take part in activities that other people enjoy

The unpleasant, bitter old miser Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is visited by the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present and Yet to Come. The result of this is his transformation: eventually his cold, pinched heart is restored to the innocent goodwill he had known in his childhood and youth.

***King Charles**'s head* = a recurrent and irrational obsession, an 'idée fixe', a subject that keeps on intruding into a person's conversation

King Charles I (1600-49) was executed by having his head cut off in 1649, but the allusion is literary, rather than historical. In Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*

BDD-V119 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:53:50 UTC)

(1849-50) Mr Dick, a slightly mad character, lives with David's aunt, Betsy Trotwood. It is his habit to keep returning to this subject in all his discussions.

David finds out from his aunt that Mr Dick has been trying to write "a Memorial about his own history" but that the subject of King Charles' head keeps intruding into anything he tries to commit to paper. Mr Dick uses a discarded manuscript, with its references to King Charles' head, to make a "great kite" that he flies with David as an expression of their friendship. The narrative, written in David's voice, comments that "it was certain that the Memorial never would be finished".

The exchange where Aunt Betsy discusses Mr Dick's affliction with the young David goes:

"Did he say anything to you about King Charles the First, child?" "Yes, aunt." "Ah!" said my aunt, rubbing her nose as if she were a little vexed. "That's his allegorical way of expressing it. He connects his illness with great disturbance and agitation, naturally, and that's the figure, or the simile, or whatever it's called, which he chooses to use."

*a **London** particular* = a dense fog formerly affecting London

Charles Dickens used the term in his novel *Bleak House* (1853). In UK cities, especially London, the smoke from millions of chimneys often combined with the mists and fogs of the Thames valley. The result was commonly known as a *London particular* or *London fog*, and likened to pea soup – apparently having the same consistency. In an interesting reversal of the idiom, 'London particular' later became the name for a thick pea and ham soup.

This kind of fog has been called *pea soup* or a *pea souper*. It can be tinged with hues of grey, yellow or green depending on whether it is 'seasoned' with soot particles or sulphurous gases. Such smogs have been the bane of large, overpopulated cities all over the world ever since the industrial revolution, a major concern for environmental-conscious citizens and a potential cause of death for the more vulnerable or sensitive inhabitants.

***Alice**-in-Wonderland* = very strange, unreal, or unnatural

The phrase is a reference to Lewis Carroll's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) which is about an imaginary land where nothing is done according to common sense and reason.

More recently it has also been used in other ways, as in "The election campaign is now taking on the quality of Alice in Wonderland, where nothing is what it seems and words mean what you want them to mean." (Daily Express, 3 Oct 1974)

*grin like a **Cheshire** cat* = to smile widely, especially in such a way that one shows all one's teeth; a very broad, often foolish grin

This is another phrase familiar due to *Alice's Adventures.* In the book, the mysterious Cheshire Cat slowly disappears – except for its broad grin, which remains visible and hovers in the air uncannily. However, the phrase did not originate in the story; we have to look further back for its beginnings.

Cheshire is a county famous for its cheeses and it is possible that at one time these were moulded in the form of grinning cats or cat-heads, or had these stamped on them.

Another explanation suggests that the coat of arms of an influential family in Cheshire contained a lion rampant which, when represented by ignorant sign painters in the course of time, came out looking more like a grinning cat than a roaring lion.

The third story is that the phrase is a shortened version of the original *to grin like a Cheshire Caterling*, referring to one of Richard III's gamekeepers in this county, a big brute of a man who used to grin unpleasantly while poachers were hanged.

BDD-V119 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:53:50 UTC)

as mad as a ***hatter*** */ as mad as a* ***March hare*** = zany, eccentric, demented; behaving in a strange, silly or irresponsible way

The Mad Hatter and the White Rabbit are two more memorable characters in the same book, but the expressions themselves had already been in use by the time of their 'birth'. Some authorities hold that the first one refers to an old belief that hatters often went mad. It is now known that by working with mercurous nitrate (formerly used in making felt hats), they may have developed a disease, and one of the effects of this chronic mercury poisoning is a tendency toward severe twitching.

However, the expression may originally have been 'mad as an atter', *atter* meaning 'poison' being related to 'adder', the poisonous snake (viper) whose bite was formerly considered to cause insanity. It might be interesting to add that 'an adder' itself resulted from 'a nadder' by 'wrong shortening' (M.E.), just like 'an apron' used to be 'a napron'.

Hares, on the other hand, can be seen running and leaping about wildly during the month of March, behaving in a more unpredictable and playful way than at any other time of the year, as it is their mating time. Some authorities, however, consider that March hare is an alteration of 'marsh hare', a hare that is reputed to behave oddly because of the damp surroundings in which it lives.

(there will be) ***jam*** *tomorrow* = the promise of prosperity, benefits, happiness, etc. (indicating that the speaker does not believe that these promises will ever actually be fulfilled)

The source of this idiom is Lewis Carroll's second Alice book, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). After Alice helps the White Queen dress, she is offered the position of lady's maid and "Twopence a week, and jam every other day." When Alice replies that she does not care for jam and doesn't want any today, The Queen retorts: "You couldn't have it if you did want it … The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam today."

a ***Jekyll*** *and Hyde* = a person who shows two opposing or completely different natures or tendencies in his (moral) character and his actions

Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is a story about one man with two opposing natures, one good (Dr. Henry Jekyll) and one evil (Mr. Edward Hyde). In everyday language this mental condition is known today as a 'split personality', psychiatry would identify it as 'dissociative identity disorder'.

Never*-never land* = an imaginary utopian place or situation

The allusion is to the fictional country first introduced as "the Never Never Land" in J. M. Barrie's theatre play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, first staged in 1904. It also appears in subsequent works by the same author and several others based on them. It has been *Never Never Never Land*, *Never Never Land* and *Neverland*. It is the place where Peter Pan, Tinker Bell, the Lost Boys and Red Indians dwelled, and where Pirates sailed up the lake. Since Peter Pan is well known for having refused to grow up, *Neverland* is sometimes used as a metaphor for eternal childhood, immortality and escapism.

The term had been applied previously to the whole of the Australian outback, but in the early 20th century it was restricted to the unpopulated Northern Territory and Queensland in Australia: whoever ventured there might never return.

(to be) in the ***dog-house*** = to be in disgrace or disfavour because of what you have done

BDD-V119 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:53:50 UTC)

The idiom became popular due to the same children's book but in fact dates back to the beginning of the 17th century. The reference is to a bad dog banished from the house and confined to its kennel as a punishment. It is usually applied to a misbehaving husband who has incurred his wife's marked displeasure.

In the novel the Darling children are cared for by Nana, the gentle and faithful old New-foudland. Mr Darling, jealous of his children's affection for the dog, gives Nana unpleasant medicine which he himself promised to drink. The family does not appreciate his humour and he, annoyed, ties her up in the yard before going out for the evening. That night Peter Pan manages to enter the children's bedroom, teaches them to fly and takes them to visit 'Never land'. After their disappearance Mr Darling, who "felt in his bones that all the blame was his for having chained Nana up", goes to live in the kennel as a penance, "swearing in the bitterness of his remorse ... that he would never leave the kennel until his children came back".

something nasty in the ***woodshed*** = a shocking or distasteful thing kept secret; an unpleasant experience in one's past

The catchphrase is from Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*, a comic novel by the English author, published in 1932, which parodies the romanticised, sometimes doom-laden accounts of rural life popular at the time.

Aunt Ada Doom is a reclusive, miserly widow, owner of the farm, who constantly complains of having seen "something nasty in the woodshed" when she was a girl. This shock she uses as a pretext to emotionally blackmail her family.

Big ***Brother*** = a person, often unknown or invented, in control of a country, especially one representing the political power in an authoritarian state that polices and controls people's private thoughts and affairs; the state perceived as a sinister force supervising citizens' lives and violating civil liberties

Big Brother is a fictional character in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the enigmatic dictator of Oceania, a typical totalitarian state. The ubiquitous slogan "Big Brother is watching you" might sound like the constant reassurance of a benevolent protector but is in fact a reminder and a warning that all inhabitants are under constant surveillance.

once *and future* = denoting someone or something that is eternal, enduring, or constant

The source is the title of T. H. White's Arthurian fantasy novel, *Once and Future King* (1958). It has four parts: *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *A Candle in the Wind*, which follow King Arthur from his childhood to the eve of his death. The novel explores the relationship between human nature, power and justice as the young king tries to impose his idea of chivalry over the generally assumed "might makes right" attitude of his contemporaries. His attempt is doomed to failure since even the justice of chivalry is maintained by force.

The title of the novel comes from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (21:7): "Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again ... But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus." There are at least three possible translations of this internally rhymed hexameter, notably the second part: *Here lies Arthur, King that was, King that will be*; ... *Arthur, king once, and king to be* or, in T. H. White's version: ... *Arthur, the once and future king*.

BDD-V119 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:53:50 UTC)

Bibliography

1. Flavell, Linda & Roger 2002, *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

2. *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* 1998, Longman Group UK Limited

3. *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* 2005, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

4. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms* 2006, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

5. *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* 2004, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

http://www.phrases.org.uk

http://en.wikipedia.org

BDD-V119 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:53:50 UTC)