

Lesson 2

Niobe

by Jean Lang

Learning about Words: Words from Greek Myths

The Greek myths have left English-speaking people with a wealth of words. Do you know what it is to have *herculean* strength? What is your *Achilles* heel? Do you have a *hydra*-headed problem? All of those words—*herculean*, *Achilles*, and *hydra*—are from Greek myths. If you know the myths, the words are understood, even if you have never heard them used before.

Hercules, the son of Zeus, was known for his strength, and so *herculean* means possessing extraordinary strength. It takes herculean strength, for instance, to pull a car with one's own teeth, as some stunt men have accomplished. Some gymnasts possess herculean strength in being able to stand themselves on one hand!

Achilles, the brother of Agamemnon, was almost immortal. He had been dipped in the immortal-making River Styx, held by his heel, and as his heel never touched the water, it was not immune to death. He died when an arrow, shot by the bow of Paris, found its way in that unfortunate place. An Achilles heel, then, is an area of great weakness. One person's Achilles heel might be mathematics, another's might be getting things done on time.

The last word mentioned, *hydra*, names one of the offspring of Echidna. It was difficult to kill this monster, as when any one of its nine heads was severed, another grew back. If you have a hydra-headed problem, then, it is a problem that seems unsolvable. Once one aspect of it is solved, another difficulty arises. Even if you had herculean strength, you could not kill the hydra; however, it *was* Hercules who killed it by cleverly burning each head as soon it was severed.

There are so many other words that originally come from the myths. Below is a very brief list. You may want to read the mythological stories behind the words!

aegis (noun) protection or sponsorship, named after the shield of Hercules' father Zeus

Argus-eyed (adjective) very watchful, named after the Greek myth of Argus, who had one hundred eyes

stygian (adjective) very dark and gloomy, named after Styx, a river in the dark underworld

lethargic (adjective) very tired or apathetic, named after Lethe, a river in the underworld which made people forget

odyssey (noun) a long adventurous journey, named after Greek king Odysseus who on returning from the Trojan War takes a ten-year journey home that is full of adventure

Vocabulary in Context

Discover the meaning of the italicized word from the sentence.

1. The *gallant* knight rode on his war steed for his lady to rid the land of the robbers.
 - a) stylish
 - b) tall
 - c) brave
2. Dressed in his new uniform, the soldier looked so *gallant*.
 - a) attractive
 - b) fierce
 - c) simple
3. Tom's gracious friendly and kind manners made the women say he was the most *gallant* man at the party.
 - a) flattering
 - b) polite
 - c) shy

4. The little boy did not get along with his *peers*, and so he was often found talking to adults and younger children rather than boys his own age.
 - a) sisters
 - b) an equal, in age or position
 - c) teachers
5. In the excellence of his playing, the violinist was *peerless* in America and Europe.
 - a) penniless
 - b) friendless
 - c) without equal
6. On the mission field Hudson Taylor relied not on man's help, but on *divine* help.
 - a) missionary
 - b) having to do with the Bible
 - c) having to do with God
7. In his novel *1984*, the author George Orwell *divined* that the future world would use technology to spy on people.
 - a) told the future
 - b) made a guess
 - c) criticized
8. Though his brothers and sisters loved Ferris wheels and roller coasters, Terrence *despised* all amusement park rides.
 - a) enjoyed
 - b) looked down on or hated
 - c) played on
9. The *blasphemous* young sailor offended the pious old man who told him to remain quiet.
 - a) joking
 - b) arrogant
 - c) speaking with great disrespect for God or holy things

10. As he was known for his *unerring* work on the project, Mr. Tyrone was given a raise by the company.
- a) without mistakes
 - b) idle
 - c) possessive
11. They watched the young English farmers with their *scythes* reaping the crop of wheat.
- a) farming tool with a large round blade
 - b) seeds for crops
 - c) pointed shovels
12. Did you know the *anguish* of losing everything you have?
- a) experience
 - b) painful emotional struggle
 - c) being in great need
13. After everyone else had left, Micah and his sister Cecilia begged their uncle to *stay*.
- a) go away
 - b) live with someone
 - c) remain
14. Matthew tried to *stay* the spread of his poison ivy with medicinal lotion.
- a) stop
 - b) cure
 - c) soothe
15. God was his help and his stay.
- a) one who protects
 - b) source of help and power to go on
 - c) source of wisdom

ANSWERS

1) c 2) a 3) b 4) b 5) c 6) c 7) a 8) b 9) c 10) a 11) a 12) b 13) c 14) a 15) b

Vocabulary Exercise: Suggested Word

In the spaces provided, write in the word from the word bank that is suggested by the sentence.

WORD BANK

gallant, peer, peerless, divine, despise, blasphemous,
unerring, scythe, anguish, stay

1. _____ John has flawless taste in men's suits.
2. _____ Karen looks down on gas guzzling vehicles like minivans.
3. _____ In the early 1800's before the Industrial Revolution most farm work was done completely by hand at harvest time.
4. _____ John was the best basketball player in the entire neighborhood.
5. _____ The writer lost his entire family in the war.
6. _____ The ceremonies of the Jewish Temple were conducted by special priests.
7. _____ How are we going to stop the dangerous effects of water pollution on the fishing industry?
8. _____ The pious mother did not want her little son to hear the sailor's language.
9. _____ Not wanting to be with the little ones, William asked if he could play with the children his age.
10. _____ The young man was very kind and courteous to all of the women at the party.

Niobe

by Jean Lang

Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus. Her husband was the King of Thebes and a son of Zeus named Amphion. She had seven beautiful daughters and seven handsome and gallant sons.

To be sure, Niobe was proud. But the reason for her pride was not that she was beautiful, or that her husband was a powerful king, or that they both were of noble descent, or that their kingdom was great. The reason she was proud was that she felt very sure that no woman had ever given birth to children like her own children. She thought that they were peerless, that nowhere on heaven or earth could be found any like them. Even in our own day there are mothers who feel as Niobe felt.

But among the Immortals there was also a mother with children whom she counted as peerless. Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, was very certain that neither in the eternity past, nor in the eternity to come, could there be a son and daughter so perfect in beauty, in wisdom, and in power as the two that were her own. She loudly proclaimed her proud belief, and when Niobe heard it she laughed in scorn.

“The goddess has a son and a daughter,” she said. “They may be all that she says they are—beautiful, wise and powerful. But I have given birth to seven daughters and seven sons, and each son is more than the peer of Apollo, each daughter more than the equal of Artemis, the moon-goddess!”

Leto heard her boastful words and she became angry. Each year the people of Thebes were accustomed to hold a great festival in honor of Leto and her son and daughter, and it was an evil day for Niobe when she came upon the adoring crowd which burnt incense before the altars of the gods and had assembled together to celebrate their divine glory.

“Oh foolish ones!” she said, her voice full of scorn. “Am I not greater than Leto? I am the daughter of a goddess. My husband, the king, is the son of a god. Am I not beautiful? Am I not queenly as Leto herself? And surely, I am richer by far than the goddess who has only one daughter and one son. Look on my seven noble sons! Behold the beauty of my seven daughters, and see if they do not equal the dwellers in Olympus in beauty and all else!”

When the people looked, they shouted in praise of their Queen. Wasn't she right? Weren't her children indeed like gods, as she said?

"Do not waste your worship, my people," Niobe said. "Instead make the prayers to your king and to me and to my children who make the kingdom's strength so great, that we can fearlessly despise the gods."

In her home on the Cynthian mountain top, Leto heard the arrogant words of the queen of Thebes, and even as a gust of wind blows smoldering ashes into a consuming fire, her growing anger flamed into rage. She called Apollo and Artemis to her, and commanded them to take revenge on the blasphemous insult which had been given to them and to their mother. The twin gods listened with burning hearts.

"Truly you will be avenged!" cried Apollo. "The shameless queen will learn that anyone who dishonors the mother of the deathless gods will not go unpunished!"

With their silver bows in their hands, the archer Apollo and the virgin huntress Artemis speedily went to Thebes. There they found all the noble youths of the kingdom pursuing their sports. Some rode horses and some were having chariot races. Excelling in all the events were the seven sons of Niobe.

Apollo lost no time. As a bolt flies from the hand of Zeus, an arrow flew from his bow, and the firstborn of Niobe fell on the floor of his winning chariot. His brother, who followed him, went on the heels of his comrade swiftly down to the Shades. Two of the other sons of Niobe were wrestling together, and as they gripped each other, still another shaft was driven from the bow of Apollo, and both lads fell by the one arrow, and there breathed their lives away.

Their elder brother ran to their aid, and to him, too, came death, swift and sure. The two youngest, even as they cried for mercy to an unknown god, were hurried after them by the unerring arrows of Apollo. The cries of those who watched this terrible slaying were not long in bringing Niobe to the place where her sons lay dead. Yet, even then, her pride was unconquered.

"You have not yet conquered, Leto!" she cried. "My seven sons lie dead, but I still have seven daughters, perfect in their beauty and loveliness. Try to match them, if you can, with the beauty of your two! I am still richer than you, O cruel and jealous mother of one daughter and

one son!”

But even as she spoke, Artemis had drawn her bow, and as the scythe of a reaper quickly cuts down the tall white blossoms in the meadow one after the other, her arrows slew the daughters of Niobe. When only one remained, the pride of Niobe was broken. With her arms around the little slender frame of her golden-haired youngest born, she looked up to heaven, and cried on all the gods for mercy.

“She is so little!” she wailed. “So young—so dear! Ah, spare me *one*,” she said, “only one out of so many!”

But the gods laughed. Like a harsh note of music sounded the twang of Artemis’ bow. Pierced by a silver arrow, the little girl lay dead. The dignity of Leto was avenged.

Overwhelmed by despair, King Amphion killed himself, and Niobe was left alone to gaze on the ruin around her. For nine days she sat, a Greek Rachel, weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. On the tenth day, the sight was too much even for the hearts of the gods to endure. They turned the bodies into stone and buried them themselves. And when they looked on the face of Niobe and saw a bleeding anguish on it that no human hand could stay nor the word of any god comfort, the gods were merciful. Her grief was immortalized. At their will, Niobe became a stone, and was carried by a wailing tempest to the summit of Mount Sipylus, in Lydia, where a spring of Argos bore her name. Niobe was now a rock. But so great was her grief that from her blind eyes of stone, the tears still flowed, a clear stream of running water, and a symbol of a mother’s anguish and never-ending grief.

Questions for Discussion

Be able to answer the following questions orally.

1. Who is Niobe? Write down the name of her father and tell who he was. If you do not know, look it up in a dictionary or encyclopedia.
2. Tell Niobe’s opinion of her own children. How does Leto feel about her own children?
3. Why does Leto become furious at Niobe and what she do to punish her?
4. Who eventually punishes Niobe? How do they punish her?

Literary Words: Tragedies and Hubris

Many of our “fancy” literary words come from Greek. They *sound* hard, but really are not that hard to understand. Perhaps it would be better if we just used English words instead, but we are so used to using the Greek words, students must learn them when studying literature. One of these “fancy” words is *hubris*, which means pride.

So many of the old plays deal with the sin of hubris. These plays, called *tragedies*, often end sadly in a death. Sad endings is what we would expect, though, from characters who have hubris. The tragedy *Julius Caesar*, for instance, is about a character that dies because of his hubris, or pride. This famous play, written by William Shakespeare, begins with the famous Roman statesman Julius Caesar acting like a god and ends with him—and another proud but noble man—dying for it. Caesar was stabbed to death by the gray-haired Roman law makers because he made himself out to be something that he was not: an immortal god.

Vice and Virtue: Pride of Life and Being Prepared for Grief

At the end of the ancient Greek play *Oedipus the King*, the audience is told not to count themselves happy until the end of life when they can say that they haven’t suffered. Who, then, can say that they are happy? Really, no one. We all suffer sometime in our life—from the common cold to chronic illness, from not getting exactly what we wanted for our birthday to experiencing the heart-wrenching grief that comes when we lose a loved one. Everyone in the world will have sadness and trouble at least once in his lifetime.

Niobe shows her pride when she says that she is better than a goddess. She has fourteen beautiful children, while the goddess Leto has only two. Children are a mother’s pride and joy, and the myth’s account of Niobe’s boast sounds almost ordinary in its theme. But when the children die—every one of them—she realizes too late that there is one thing different between herself and Leto—death and suffering. The gods, you see, never suffer. When Niobe does suffer, she cries and cries, and even when she is turned into an insensible rock, water pours from her. If the myth is teaching any lesson, it is this. Never should we make the proud boast that we are more than human and beyond suffering.

Think about those who are experiencing trouble—whether they are sick from a cold or in the midst of even more serious trouble and pray for them. Pray also for you and your family that when sadness or trouble comes—and it will—that you will feel God’s presence and strength.

Writing Exercise: Detail

The story that you just read about Niobe contains just the right amount of detail about the queen, her boastfulness and ensuing tragedy to interest a reader. A story with too little detail is not very interesting, while a story with unimportant detail can be confusing or tedious. Without details, a story reads like a meal tastes without salt or spice. It is bland, or tasteless. Compare the following two stories. Which of them is more interesting—Story A or Story B?

STORY A

There is a girl in our class who moved from a foreign country to our small rural town some months ago because her father, who is very smart, got a job teaching in the United States. Although she has only been here for half a year, her English is very good. Her family invited her classmates’ families over for a party. She was excited, but also a little anxious. As the day approached, she began worrying about a lot of things. Would her friends think her family’s customs strange because they do not do them in the United States? Would they eat the strange foreign food? Would they laugh at her grandmother’s traditional dress and way of speaking? Finally, when the day arrived, she sat by the window to await their arrival. She was surprised how at ease the American guests were with her family’s customs. The parents ate the traditional food of her country, and even most of the children—except one of them who we all know is a very picky eater. Although Tommy wouldn’t touch his meal, our classmate was used to hearing him complain about his own mother’s American cooking. Before the guests left, they asked to see our classmate’s grandmother, who had cooked the meal, to tell her how delicious it was. My classmate’s grandmother, who was not dressed American-style because she lives in an old-time village, came out of the kitchen and she thanked them.

STORY B

Seung-Ah Lee moved from Korea to our small town last August when her father got a job teaching chemistry at the local university. Although she has only been here for a half a year, her English is very good—although she complains that her grandmother, who comes from a traditional village, does not speak it very well. Last week her parents invited several families in our class to her house for a traditional Korean meal. Seung-Ah was excited, but also nervous. As the day approached, she worried about everything from her family’s spicy food to her grandmother’s broken English. Finally, Seung-Ah sat by the window to await everyone’s arrival. She was surprised how at ease we were in taking our shoes off before entering the house and bowing as we greeted her parents. Everyone thought the meal was delicious—all except Tommy, who even complains about his own mother’s delicious spaghetti dinners. Before leaving, the guests asked to see Seung-Ah’s grandmother to tell her how delightful the meal she had prepared was. The grandmother gracefully bowed in her traditional *hanbok*, and in slow but perfect English said, “Thank you very much.”

Both stories retell the same event, but Story A is not very specific or interesting. (When it does include detail, such as the fact that the father is smart, it is unimportant to the story.) It talks about a girl, but does not mention her name or what country her family has moved from. It also does not mention the specific family customs she was embarrassed about. In contrast, Story B has specific details, including the name of the classmate, the Korean customs, and the grandmother’s traditional clothing (the Korean *hanbok*). Notice, however, that even though Story B has more interesting and relevant detail, it does not have more words. In fact, it contains *fewer* words. Although it hardly mentions anything specific, Story A contains a full 243 words, while Story B contains only 195.

Writing Exercise 1

Underline the words in the following sentences that you think are general or vague and then change the sentences using specific details. Try to use fewer words, if possible.

EXAMPLE

It was not an unpleasant day.

POSSIBLE ANSWER

The day was sunny and mild.

1. His books were lying on the workspace and there were so many of them that there was no room to do my homework.

Possible answer: My brother's textbooks covered the desk, leaving me no room to do my history homework.

2. We got directions from the woman at the station.
3. Sally told her brother not to throw the thing out because it still might be useful.
4. We came out of the room ready to ask the man some questions.
5. The children searched for some things at the beach.
6. When we got to the trail, we ran ahead of everyone.
7. I didn't bring my present to the party.
8. The children played in the field.
9. The people told us about the park they went to on vacation.
10. The meal was not very tasty.

Writing Exercise 2

In about five sentences, write about a family experience. Vary your sentences and include detail.

EXAMPLE 1

One Saturday afternoons, my younger sister Rachel was sweeping the kitchen floor with a straw broom that my mother keeps behind the refrigerator. . .

EXAMPLE 2

Yesterday in our tiny backyard in Broomall, my father and older brother Jim were playing catch with an old, frayed softball . . .

A Bump on the Head

by Benjamin Franklin

Learning about Words: Homonyms

Benjamin Franklin liked puns and apparently enjoyed Cotton Mather's use of *stoop* in its two meanings. If you look up the word in a good dictionary, there will be at least two entries for it. The first entry will contain the definition as Benjamin Franklin used the word—to bend forward. The word comes from the Old English word *stūpian*. However, there is another entry with the same spelling and pronunciation that has a completely different definition and origin—a fact that explains the two separate dictionary entries.

The second entry of *stoop* is from the Dutch word *stoep*. You can see from the spelling that the word looks similar to *step*, and in fact *step* and *stoop* are related and are from exactly the same Dutch word. A stoop is a series of steps leading to a house. It could also refer to a small porch. The two words *stoop*, meaning “to bend forward,” and *stoop*, meaning “steps leading to a house,” would be called *homonyms* because they have the same spelling and same pronunciation, but different definitions.

A Bump on the Head

To Dr. Mather, Boston

Passy, May 12, 1784

Reverend Sir,

I received your kind letter with your excellent advice to the people of the United States and read it with great pleasure. I hope it will be duly regarded. Many readers may lightly pass them over, but if the writings make a deep impression on one active mind in a hundred, the effects may be considerable. Permit me to mention one little example. It relates to myself, but will not be quite uninteresting to you.

When I was a boy, I met with a book titled *Essays to do Good*. I think it was written by your father. A former owner of the book had so little regard for it that several of its **leaves** were torn out. But what was left of the book gave me such food for thought that it had an influence on my

conduct through life. I have always set a greater value on the character of a *doer of good*, than on any other kind of reputation. And if I have been, as you seem to think, a useful citizen, the public owes the advantage of it to that book. You mention that you are in your 78th year. I am in my 79th. We have grown old together. It is now more than sixty years since I left Boston, but I well remember both your father and grandfather, having heard them in the pulpit and seen them in their houses. The last time I saw your father was in the beginning of 1724 when I visited him after my first trip to Pennsylvania. He received me into his library, and when I left, he showed me a shorter way out of the house through a narrow passage, which crossed by a beam overhead. We were still talking as I withdrew, he accompanying me behind. When I turned partly towards him, he said hastily, *Stoop, stoop!* I did not understand him till I felt my head hit against the beam. He was a man that never missed any occasion of giving instruction. He said to me, “You are young and have the world before you. **Stoop** as you go through it and you will miss many hard thumps.” This advice, thus beat into my head, has frequently been useful to me. I often think of it when I see hurt pride and misfortunes brought on people by their carrying their heads too high. With great and sincere esteem, I have the honor to be, etc.,

Benjamin Franklin

Reading Questions

Circle the correct answer to each of the following questions.

1. The reader can guess that the letter Benjamin Franklin received from his friend ____.
 - a) talks about unimportant things
 - b) says things Benjamin Franklin does not agree with
 - c) has wise advice for his country
 - d) talks about *Essays to do Good*
 - e) tells interesting stories, as Benjamin Franklin’s letter does
2. From the letter, it can be guessed that the friend Benjamin Franklin is writing to ____.
 - a) lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
 - b) is the father of the one who wrote *Essays to do Good*

- c) is much older than Benjamin Franklin
 - d) is uneducated
 - e) lived in the 1700s
3. Benjamin Franklin says in the first paragraph, "Permit me to mention one little example." What is Franklin giving an example of?
- a) Franklin's being a doer of good
 - b) avoiding accidents
 - c) good advice found in books that may have a long-lasting influence on people
 - d) Franklin's life in Boston
 - e) getting old
4. What is NOT true of the book *Essays to do Good*?
- a) Franklin first read the book when he was seventy-nine years old.
 - b) Franklin thinks it was written by a man named Mather.
 - c) The book made a deep impression on Franklin.
 - d) Franklin owned a copy of the book that had pages ripped out of it.
 - e) Franklin says that if he was able to do any good for the American people, it was due to that book.
5. Which of the following BEST gives the definition of the word *leaves* as it is used in the second paragraph (printed in bold)?
- a) part of a tree
 - b) pages of a book
 - c) cover of a book
 - d) information
 - e) examples
6. Which of the following is NOT mentioned in Benjamin Franklin's letter?
- a) Benjamin Franklin once lived in Boston.
 - b) Benjamin Franklin went to church when he was in Boston.
 - c) Benjamin Franklin believes that his story about getting a bump on his head would be interesting to the friend he is writing to.
 - d) Benjamin Franklin does not like listening to other people's advice.
 - e) A preacher gave Benjamin Franklin advice to be humble.

7. According to his letter, which of the following people would Benjamin respect *most*?
- a) a man who cleverly succeeds in a book-selling business
 - b) a little child who avoids lying
 - c) a young man who risks his life for a religious cause
 - d) an old woman who chooses to live without wealth
 - e) a man who founds a library at his own expense so that poor young people can learn
8. Which of the following does NOT describe the man who received Benjamin Franklin into his library?
- a) His last name was Mather.
 - b) He wrote the book *Essays to do Good*.
 - c) He was a minister.
 - d) He gave Benjamin Franklin a short lesson on humility.
 - e) He lived in Pennsylvania.
9. Which of the following BEST gives the definition of the word *stoop* as it is used in the second paragraph (printed in bold)?
- a) walk proudly
 - b) sit down
 - c) beg
 - d) act humbly
 - e) be wise
10. What does Benjamin Franklin mean by the last words in the letter, “by their carrying their heads too high”?
- a) being careless and getting hit on the head
 - b) acting silly
 - c) being dramatic
 - d) being proud
 - e) experiencing misfortune

Literary Words: Epistles and Epistolary Novels

An epistle is a letter. Many years ago epistles, besides personal messengers, were practically the only means of communication for those living far away from each other. Because letters took a long time to get to

the recipients and cost a considerable amount of money to send, people generally spent more time and effort in composing a letter. The common person could not afford books or newspapers to read, but a well-written letter more than made up for the lack of entertaining reading. During the 1700s epistolary novels, or novels based on letters, became very popular. These books basically told stories through letters written to and from two made-up characters. The first English novel ever written was an epistolary novel by Samuel Richardson.

Vice and Virtue: Humility to Learn

If there is one lesson that life teaches us over and over again, it is that we should not be proud. We receive bump after bump on the head as we go through life, so to speak. Yet we stubbornly refuse to listen to these lessons of life. Why do we refuse to listen? Because we are too proud. Anyone who wants to learn humility, then, must *first be humble*. Do we then have to have a humble heart before we can learn humility? Yes, we do. Pray, then, for a humble heart so that you can learn humility.

Writing: Dialog

Dialog can be very useful in making a narrative seem more *immediate*. It can give readers the sense that they are there at the event when it happened. Notice that indirect quotations do not have the same effect. Read the following passage and compare it with Benjamin Franklin's account, and you will notice that Franklin's original is more effective.

INDIRECT QUOTATIONS

When I turned partly towards him, he quickly told me to bend down. I did not understand him till I felt my head hit against the beam. He was a man that never missed any occasion of giving instruction. He said that I was young and had the world before me, and that I should bend down as I went through it to miss many hard thumps.

Writing Exercise

Rewrite the following sentences using dialog. You can add more detail for the quotation.

EXAMPLE

Robert explained why he could not go with our family to the beach.

ANSWER

Robert said, "I can't go with your family to the beach because my grandmother will be visiting us from Indiana."

1. Sarah joked that she was such a bad swimmer, her dog could swim better than she could, as at least he could "doggy paddle."

2. When I lost my color pencils and asked my brother if I could borrow his, he angrily said that I couldn't.

3. Matteo praised his brother for doing such a good job cleaning the floor.

4. Joshua gave two reasons why he liked the book.

5. I felt discouraged when Francis criticized my painting.

6. Sally's brother Thomas shouted in alarm when he discovered that all his apricot yoghurt had been eaten and that there was none to take to school the next day.

7. Nate asked if he could use Gabe's bicycle, but he said he couldn't.

8. Bruno asked Linus if he wanted to play baseball in the neighborhood field.

9. Margot's sister Ana said she likes ballet more than Celtic folk dance.

10. Julianne told her sister Kathleen that she did not want to watch *Mary Poppins* tonight.
