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# THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY

by  
Ambrose Bierce



**KONTRAST**  
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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*The Devil's Dictionary* was begun in a weekly paper in 1881, and was continued in a desultory way at long intervals until 1906. In that year a large part of it was published in covers with the title *The Cynic's Word Book*, a name which the author had not the power to reject or happiness to approve. To quote the publishers of the present work:

“This more reverent title had previously been forced upon him by the religious scruples of the last newspaper in which a part of the work had appeared, with the natural consequence that when it came out in covers the country already had been flooded by its imitators with a score of ‘cynic’ books—*The Cynic's This*, *The Cynic's That*, and *The Cynic's t'Other*. Most of these books were merely stupid, though some of them added the distinction of silliness. Among them, they brought the word ‘cynic’ into disfavor so deep that any book bearing it was discredited in advance of publication.”

Meantime, too, some of the enterprising humorists of the country had helped themselves to such parts of the work as served their needs, and many of its definitions, anecdotes, phrases and so forth, had become more or less current in popular speech. This explanation is made, not with any pride of priority in trifles, but in simple denial of possible charges of plagiarism, which is no trifle. In merely resuming his own the author hopes to be held guiltless by those to whom the work is addressed—enlightened souls who prefer dry wines to sweet, sense to sentiment, wit to humor and clean English to slang.

A conspicuous, and it is hoped not unpleasant, feature of the book is its abundant illustrative quotations from eminent poets, chief of whom is that learned and ingenious cleric, Father Gas-salasca Jape, S.J., whose lines bear his initials. To Father Jape's kindly encouragement and assistance the author of the prose text is greatly indebted.

A. B.

# A

ABASEMENT, n. A decent and customary mental attitude in the presence of wealth or power. Peculiarly appropriate in an employee when addressing an employer.

ABATIS, n. Rubbish in front of a fort, to prevent the rubbish outside from molesting the rubbish inside.

ABDICATION, n. An act whereby a sovereign attests his sense of the high temperature of the throne.

*Poor Isabella's dead, whose abdication  
Set all tongues wagging in the Spanish nation.  
For that performance 'twere unfair to scold her:  
She wisely left a throne too hot to hold her.  
To History she'll be no royal riddle—  
Merely a plain parched pea that jumped the griddle.*

G.J.

ABDOMEN, n. The temple of the god Stomach, in whose worship, with sacrificial rights, all true men engage. From women this ancient faith commands but a stammering assent. They sometimes minister at the altar in a half-hearted and ineffective way, but true reverence for the one deity that men really adore they know not. If woman had a free hand in the world's marketing the race would become graminivorous.

ABILITY, n. The natural equipment to accomplish some small part of the meaner ambitions distinguishing able men from dead

ones. In the last analysis ability is commonly found to consist mainly in a high degree of solemnity. Perhaps, however, this impressive quality is rightly appraised; it is no easy task to be solemn.

ABNORMAL, adj. Not conforming to standard. In matters of thought and conduct, to be independent is to be abnormal, to be abnormal is to be detested. Wherefore the lexicographer adviseth a striving toward the straiter resemblance of the Average Man than he hath to himself. Whoso attaineth thereto shall have peace, the prospect of death and the hope of Hell.

ABORIGINIES, n. Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber; they fertilize.

ABRACADABRA.

By *Abracadabra* we signify  
An infinite number of things.  
'Tis the answer to What? and How? and Why?  
And Whence? and Whither?—a word whereby  
The Truth (with the comfort it brings)  
Is open to all who grope in night,  
Crying for Wisdom's holy light.

Whether the word is a verb or a noun  
Is knowledge beyond my reach.  
I only know that 'tis handed down.  
From sage to sage,  
From age to age—  
An immortal part of speech!

Of an ancient man the tale is told  
That he lived to be ten centuries old,  
In a cave on a mountain side.  
(True, he finally died.)

The fame of his wisdom filled the land,  
For his head was bald, and you'll understand  
His beard was long and white  
And his eyes uncommonly bright.

Philosophers gathered from far and near  
To sit at his feet and hear and hear,  
Though he never was heard  
To utter a word  
But "*Abracadabra, abracadab,  
Abracada, abracad,  
Abraca, abrac, abra, ab!*"  
'Twas all he had,  
'Twas all they wanted to hear, and each  
Made copious notes of the mystical speech,  
Which they published next—  
A trickle of text  
In a meadow of commentary.  
Mighty big books were these,  
In number, as leaves of trees;  
In learning, remarkable—very!

He's dead,  
As I said,  
And the books of the sages have perished,  
But his wisdom is sacredly cherished.  
In *Abracadabra* it solemnly rings,  
Like an ancient bell that forever swings.  
O, I love to hear  
That word make clear  
Humanity's General Sense of Things.

Jamrach Holobom

ABRIDGE, v.t. To shorten.

*When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for people to abridge their king, a decent respect for the opinions of*

*mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

Oliver Cromwell

ABRUPT, adj. Sudden, without ceremony, like the arrival of a cannon-shot and the departure of the soldier whose interests are most affected by it. Dr. Samuel Johnson beautifully said of another author's ideas that they were "concatenated without abruption."

ABSCOND, v.i. To "move in a mysterious way," commonly with the property of another.

*Spring beckons! All things to the call respond;  
The trees are leaving and cashiers abscond.*

Phela Orm

ABSENT, adj. Peculiarly exposed to the tooth of detraction; vilified; hopelessly in the wrong; superseded in the consideration and affection of another.

*To men a man is but a mind. Who cares  
What face he carries or what form he wears?  
But woman's body is the woman. O,  
Stay thou, my sweetheart, and do never go,  
But heed the warning words the sage hath said:  
A woman absent is a woman dead.*

Jogo Tyree

ABSENTEE, n. A person with an income who has had the forethought to remove himself from the sphere of exaction.

ABSOLUTE, adj. Independent, irresponsible. An absolute monarchy is one in which the sovereign does as he pleases so long as he pleases the assassins. Not many absolute monarchies are left, most of them having been replaced by limited monarchies, where

the sovereign's power for evil (and for good) is greatly curtailed, and by republics, which are governed by chance.

ABSTAINER, n. A weak person who yields to the temptation of denying himself a pleasure. A total abstainer is one who abstains from everything but abstention, and especially from inactivity in the affairs of others.

*Said a man to a crapulent youth: "I thought  
You a total abstainer, my son."  
"So I am, so I am," said the scapegrace caught—  
"But not, sir, a bigoted one."*

G. J.

ABSURDITY, n. A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

ACADEME, n. An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.

ACADEMY, n. [from ACADEME] A modern school where football is taught.

ACCIDENT, n. An inevitable occurrence due to the action of immutable natural laws.

ACCOMPLICE, n. One associated with another in a crime, having guilty knowledge and complicity, as an attorney who defends a criminal, knowing him guilty. This view of the attorney's position in the matter has not hitherto commanded the assent of attorneys, no one having offered them a fee for assenting.

ACCORD, n. Harmony.

ACCORDION, n. An instrument in harmony with the sentiments of an assassin.

ACCOUNTABILITY, n. The mother of caution.

*“My accountability, bear in mind,”  
Said the Grand Vizier: “Yes, yes,”  
Said the Shah: “I do—’tis the only kind  
Of ability you possess.”*

Joram Tate

ACCUSE, v.t. To affirm another’s guilt or unworth; most commonly as a justification of ourselves for having wronged him.

ACEPHALOUS, adj. In the surprising condition of the Crusader who absently pulled at his forelock some hours after a Saracen scimitar had, unconsciously to him, passed through his neck, as related by de Joinville.

ACHIEVEMENT, n. The death of endeavor and the birth of disgust.

ACKNOWLEDGE, v.t. To confess. Acknowledgement of one another’s faults is the highest duty imposed by our love of truth.

ACQUAINTANCE, n. A person whom we know well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to. A degree of friendship called slight when its object is poor or obscure, and intimate when he is rich or famous.

ACTUALLY, adv. Perhaps; possibly.

ADAGE, n. Boned wisdom for weak teeth.

ADAMANT, n. A mineral frequently found beneath a corset. Soluble in solicitate of gold.

ADDER, n. A species of snake. So called from its habit of adding funeral outlays to the other expenses of living.

ADHERENT, n. A follower who has not yet obtained all that he expects to get.

ADMINISTRATION, n. An ingenious abstraction in politics, designed to receive the kicks and cuffs due to the premier or president. A man of straw, proof against bad-egging and dead-catting.

ADMIRAL, n. That part of a war-ship which does the talking while the figure-head does the thinking.

ADMIRATION, n. Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

ADMONITION, n. Gentle reproof, as with a meat-axe. Friendly warning.

*Consigned by way of admonition,  
His soul forever to perdition.*

Judibras

ADORE, v.t. To venerate expectantly.

ADVICE, n. The smallest current coin.

*"The man was in such deep distress,"  
Said Tom, "that I could do no less  
Than give him good advice." Said Jim:  
"If less could have been done for him  
I know you well enough, my son,  
To know that's what you would have done."*

Jebel Jocordy

AFFIANCED, pp. Fitted with an ankle-ring for the ball-and-chain.

AFFLICTION, n. An acclimatizing process preparing the soul for another and bitter world.

AFRICAN, n. A nigger that votes our way.

AGE, n. That period of life in which we compound for the vices that we still cherish by reviling those that we have no longer the enterprise to commit.

AGITATOR, n. A statesman who shakes the fruit trees of his neighbors—to dislodge the worms.

AIM, n.

*The task we set our wishes to.  
“Cheer up! Have you no aim in life?”  
She tenderly inquired.  
“An aim? Well, no, I haven’t, wife;  
The fact is—I have fired.”*

G.J.

AIR, n. A nutritious substance supplied by a bountiful Providence for the fattening of the poor.

ALDERMAN, n. An ingenious criminal who covers his secret thieving with a pretence of open marauding.

ALIEN, n. An American sovereign in his probationary state.

ALLAH, n. The Mahometan Supreme Being, as distinguished from the Christian, Jewish, and so forth.

*Allah's good laws I faithfully have kept,  
And ever for the sins of man have wept;  
And sometimes kneeling in the temple I  
Have reverently crossed my hands and slept.*

Junker Barlow

ALLEGIANCE, n.

*This thing Allegiance, as I suppose,  
Is a ring fitted in the subject's nose,  
Whereby that organ is kept rightly pointed  
To smell the sweetness of the Lord's anointed.*

G.J.

ALLIANCE, n. In international politics, the union of two thieves who have their hands so deeply inserted in each other's pockets that they cannot separately plunder a third.

ALLIGATOR, n. The crocodile of America, superior in every detail to the crocodile of the effete monarchies of the Old World. Herodotus says the Indus is, with one exception, the only river that produces crocodiles, but they appear to have gone West and grown up with the other rivers. From the notches on his back the alligator is called a sawrian.

ALONE, adj. In bad company.

*In contact, lo! the flint and steel,  
By spark and flame, the thought reveal  
That he the metal, she the stone,  
Had cherished secretly alone.*

Booley Fito

ALTAR, n. The place whereupon the priest formerly raveled out the small intestine of the sacrificial victim for purposes of

divination and cooked its flesh for the gods. The word is now seldom used, except with reference to the sacrifice of their liberty and peace by a male and a female tool.

*They stood before the altar and supplied  
The fire themselves in which their fat was fried.  
In vain the sacrifice!—no god will claim  
An offering burnt with an unholy flame.*

M. P. Nopput

AMBIDEXTROUS, adj. Able to pick with equal skill a right-hand pocket or a left.

AMBITION, n. An overmastering desire to be vilified by enemies while living and made ridiculous by friends when dead.

AMNESTY, n. The state's magnanimity to those offenders whom it would be too expensive to punish.

ANOINT, v.t. To grease a king or other great functionary already sufficiently slippery.

*As sovereigns are anointed by the priesthood,  
So pigs to lead the populace are greased good.*

Judibras

ANTIPATHY, n. The sentiment inspired by one's friend's friend.

APHORISM, n. Predigested wisdom.

*The flabby wine-skin of his brain  
Yields to some pathologic strain,  
And voids from its unstored abyss  
The dribble of an aphorism.*

“The Mad Philosopher,” 1697

APOLOGIZE, v.i. To lay the foundation for a future offence.

APOSTATE, n. A leech who, having penetrated the shell of a turtle only to find that the creature has long been dead, deems it expedient to form a new attachment to a fresh turtle.

APOTHECARY, n. The physician's accomplice, undertaker's benefactor and grave worm's provider.

*When Jove sent blessings to all men that are,  
And Mercury conveyed them in a jar,  
That friend of tricksters introduced by stealth  
Disease for the apothecary's health,  
Whose gratitude impelled him to proclaim:  
"My deadliest drug shall bear my patron's name!"*

G.J.

APPEAL, v.t. In law, to put the dice into the box for another throw.

APPETITE, n. An instinct thoughtfully implanted by Providence as a solution to the labor question.

APPLAUSE, n. The echo of a platitude.

APRIL FOOL, n. The March fool with another month added to his folly.

ARCHBISHOP, n. An ecclesiastical dignitary one point holier than a bishop.

*If I were a jolly archbishop,  
On Fridays I'd eat all the fish up—  
Salmon and flounders and smelts;  
On other days everything else.*

Jodo Rem

ARCHITECT, n. One who drafts a plan of your house, and plans a draft of your money.

ARDOR, n. The quality that distinguishes love without knowledge.

ARENA, n. In politics, an imaginary rat-pit in which the statesman wrestles with his record.

ARISTOCRACY, n. Government by the best men. (In this sense the word is obsolete; so is that kind of government.) Fellows that wear downy hats and clean shirts—guilty of education and suspected of bank accounts.

ARMOR, n. The kind of clothing worn by a man whose tailor is a blacksmith.

ARRAYED, pp. Drawn up and given an orderly disposition, as a rioter hanged to a lamppost.

ARREST, v.t. Formally to detain one accused of unusualness.

*God made the world in six days and was arrested on the seventh.  
The Unauthorized Version*

ARSENIC, n. A kind of cosmetic greatly affected by the ladies, whom it greatly affects in turn.

*“Eat arsenic? Yes, all you get,”  
Consenting, he did speak up;  
“Tis better you should eat it, pet,  
Than put it in my teacup.”*

Joel Huck