

THE FACTS ON FILE
DICTIONARY OF
20TH-CENTURY
ALLUSIONS

From Abbott and Costello to Ziegfeld Girls

Sylvia Cole
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Facts on File, Inc.
460 Park Avenue South
New York NY 10016
USA

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Collins Street
Oxford OX4 1XJ
United Kingdom

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cole, Sylvia.

The Facts On File dictionary of 20th-century allusions: from
Abbott and Costello to Ziegfeld girls/Sylvia Cole, Abraham H. Lass.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8160-1915-0

I. Allusions—Dictionaries. I. Lass, Abraham Harold, 1907—

II. Title.

AC5.C7234 1990

031.02—dc20

90-41796

A British CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Reprint authorized by Facts On File, Inc.

Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1992

for sale in The People's Republic of China (Excluding

Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Province of China)

ISBN 7 - 5062 - 1232 - 3

INTRODUCTION

The reader of an editorial exhorting a New York City mayor to clean out the Augean stables of his city can consult any number of readily available reference books to clarify the meaning of this classical allusion to one of the labors of Hercules. Every day we read in newspapers, books and periodicals or hear on radio and TV allusions to a senator's Achilles' heel or to a candidate's steering between Scylla and Charybdis or to the hailing of a civil rights advocate as an Antigone. All of these classical allusions have been assembled for the reader's quick enlightenment.

But there is no handy reference for clarifying the meaning of 20th-century allusions. And yet, allusions are constantly entering and enriching our vocabulary, some of them as timely as Chernobyl, meltdown, Tiananmen Square and Lebanon.

Imagine a *gung-ho* sales manager making a pitch to his sales staff. "O.K. fellas, this is it! *D-Day*! Let's get out there and *blitz* the competition. *Give 'em hell*! Now we've planned our strategy down to the last T. No *Maginot Line* here! And oh, we want no *Quislings* on our team. The last thing we need in this outfit is a *Fifth Column*. On the other hand, give yourselves room to maneuver. Don't get into any *Catch-22* situation. Promise them anything: a *New Deal*, a *Fair Deal*, a *Square Deal*. Make the first sale and the rest will follow like the *domino effect*. The *bottom line* is sell, sell, sell!"

With the substitution of "Win, win, win!" in the last line, we can imagine an almost identical pitch by an eager-beaver coach to his football team in a pregame harangue. The allusions taken from war are adaptable to almost any competitive arena, from business and politics to sports.

viii INTRODUCTION

Before July 19, 1969, nobody had ever heard of Chappaquiddick except the handful of people who lived near that tiny island in Massachusetts. After Ted Kennedy's fateful accident there, Chappaquiddick became a household word. Everybody knew how his car had plunged over the little bridge into the water, how he had extricated himself but could not do the same for his young companion of the evening, Mary Jo Kopechne, how he had waited hours before notifying the police. Everybody now knows that the events at Chappaquiddick cost Kennedy the chance to run for president of the United States. Chappaquiddick is no longer a place but now a set of circumstances.

When one has said all of this, most people respond with: Oh, yes, his Waterloo! True, Waterloo is a 19th-century allusion to the defeat of Napoleon and to speak of any person's Waterloo is to allude to his downfall. But every word has its special significance. Implicit in Chappaquiddick is defeat not by superior force, as at Waterloo, but by a tragic flaw, a failure of character, a hint of scandal in an otherwise powerful and even, for the most part, good person. So when one says, "Senator Gary Hart's brief fling with Donna Rice proved to be his Chappaquiddick," we recognize the full force of this 20th-century allusion.

Chappaquiddick has become a metaphor capable of being used in a context different from its original context, but with similar meaning. And we have been present at the birth and development of a 20th-century allusion.

Let's look at the birth of another 20th-century allusion, catch-22. Joseph Heller's immensely popular satirical novel *Catch-22* (1961) tells the story of Yossarian, a bombardier in World War II, who is not particularly interested in furthering his fanatical commander's ambition to advance his own career at the expense of his squadron. Yossarian's limited ambition is to get out of the Air Force and out of the war with his skin intact. Yet his efforts toward this end are constantly foiled by arbitrary bureaucratic regulations, among them catch-22. As a last desperate measure, Yossarian feigns madness, but, say the bureaucrats, if you are sane enough to try to get out of the war, you can't be insane enough to be dismissed from the war. In former times, when every educated person was acquainted with classical allusions, one might have described Yossarian's plight as being caught between Scylla and Charybdis, two equally ferocious monsters blocking the passage of Odysseus through a strait. Today,

anybody trying to get out of a paradoxical bind is said to be, like Yossarian, in a catch-22 situation. The specific has become generalized and metaphorical.

One more: teflon. Teflon is a chemical originally applied to machines to reduce friction. It is a very slippery substance. A smart entrepreneur coated pots and pans with teflon to prevent food from sticking and burning. In the 1980s we began to read descriptions of President Ronald Reagan as the "teflon President." Some magic slippery substance, of personality or maybe luck, made him impervious to blame. Although all around him his aides and appointees were being tarnished with shady allegations, and even legal convictions, nothing stuck to Reagan. Pretty soon we began to read about a teflon attorney general (Ed Meese) and a teflon electorate, etc., etc. The word for a chemical substance had turned into a 20th-century allusion.

This book documents more than nine hundred such transformations in our century. In every realm of experience we come across the names of people, places, things and events that have traveled the road from mere reference to metaphorical allusion. These names become shorthand for extensive descriptions or explanations. For example, when we read: "Bush is Jimmy Stewart after Reagan's John Wayne," we get in a few words what it would take paragraphs to explain. But we have to know the personae of Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne, the images projected by their movie roles, in order to decode the shorthand. In this book we provide the key to unlock the code.

We are not concerned here with John Wayne as a person born in a particular place on a particular day. We are not concerned with his biography. We are concerned only with the image of strong, laconic, macho maleness projected by all of his movie roles. A John Wayne is a Marlboro Man, another 20th-century allusion. He has become his characters. To be more exact: If we say that John Wayne played the principal role in *True Grit*, then John Wayne in that sentence is used to state a fact; but if we say that Ronald Reagan was a John Wayne president, we are using John Wayne as an allusion.

An allusion, then, as we use the word, is not a mere reference. It is a reference transformed through use into a metaphor, into a word or phrase that stands for something.

Similarly, the names of artists have entered our vocabulary. The name is identified with the work. The name, itself, has become shorthand for whatever mood, situation, character or image in real life reminds us of the work of the artist. We look out of the window

of an airplane upon the grid of the city below and say to our companion, "Look, a Mondrian!" And if our companion shares our vocabulary, there will be instant communication between us. We pass a luncheonette, and through its grimy window we see a lone coffee drinker at the counter. "That's a Hopper," we say, subsuming within the one word all the loneliness, the shabbiness, the longing and the mystery evoked by an Edward Hopper canvas. We encounter a human being and immediately sum up our first impression by labeling that person a Modigliani, a Giacometti, a Lachaise or a Renoir. It is not just that life imitates art, but that art names life and defines life for us. The artist's name enters our vocabulary as shorthand to sum up a complex vision of life.

This is true, too, of the names of writers, who give us a literary vision of life. The one word Faulknerian calls up a complex pattern of Southern social castes, racial violence, religiosity, obsession with the antebellum past, morbid sexuality, alienation, hallucinatory and rhapsodic language, as well as rambunctious humor. Quite a freight for one word!

At the same time, the names of certain literary characters created by these authors also enter the language as prototypes. We recognize the Snopes among us as a seedy, rapacious opportunist; a Dilsey as a woman who, through strong faith and compassion, patiently and quietly endures.

In every age certain names have taken on significance. Among classical allusions, Hercules stands for strength; Venus for beauty; Juno for regal stature; Antigone for heroic resistance to tyranny. From the Bible, Solomon stands for wisdom; Cain and Judas for betrayal; Herod for tyranny.

The 20th century has its own icons. A Mother Teresa is saintly; an Einstein is brilliant; a Rockefeller is rich; a Schweitzer has reverence for life. The 20th century, unlike other eras, also borrows heavily from popular culture for its mythology. Thus a Rambo or a Superman is our Hercules; a Monroe or a Garbo is our Aphrodite; a Darth Vader is our Iago; a Jackie Gleason is our Falstaff.

We have gathered more than 900 20th-century allusions. We have taken them from all walks of contemporary life: literature, art, movies, radio and TV, comics, politics, war, the Holocaust, science, social customs, psychology, crime, people and places, religion, sports. For each we have provided the original context; that is, the history of its birth and development. And for each we have given its present

meaning and application. Wherever possible, we have provided examples of its use in today's newspapers, periodicals and books.

Will any of these endure? Will they stand the test of time? Will Chappaquiddick last as an allusion for more than 2,000 years, as Achilles' heel and nemesis have lasted? Will it live for almost 200 years as Waterloo has? Ted Kennedy is not the hero of a Homeric epic nor the central character in world events on the magnitude of the Napoleonic wars. But the 20th century has had its share of epic events and epic tales and epic visions. Or, if not epic, then at least epochal. Surely Kafkaesque will endure as a certain vision of life, Molly Bloom as an archetype of womanly sensuality; Hitler as a symbol of man's potential for evil.

We have caught allusions on the wing. Some will stay; some will disappear. Some, we are sure, got away. For now we have set them down, for the record, so to speak. We hope that the reader will find as much excitement in discovering these allusions as we have had in tracking them down.

S.C.
A.H.L.

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A

Abbott and Costello Bud Abbott (the tall, debonair one) and Lou Costello (the short, explosive one) were the top money-making comedy team in movies of the 1940s, then became the most watched, most syndicated TV performers (1951–1953). The critics hated them and the show itself. The audiences loved them and the show itself.

Essentially, Abbott (1895–1974) and Costello (1906–1959) were reusing material that they had been using on stage and in film since the 1930s. The Abbott and Costello show consisted largely (the critics maintained *exclusively*) of lowbrow slapstick; outrageous puns; knockabout, physical, “prat fall” comedy routines; contrived, improbable situations; frenzied, unrelated sights and gags. Nonetheless, out of this mad, hilarious melange came such classic routines as “Who’s on First?”

Abie, the Agent The “portly, pop-eyed, mustached” central character of Harry Hershfield’s ethnic comic strip, which first appeared on February 2, 1914. *Abie, the Agent* (full name Abe Mendel Kabibble shortened to Abe Kabibble) was not the first ethnic comic strip. It had been preceded by *Happy Hooligan* (Irish) and the *Katzenjammer Kids* or *The Captain and the Kids* (German). It was, however, the first ethnic comic strip to deal sympathetically with its characters.

Abie, the Agent reflects some of the essential quality of urban life among the lower-middle classes circa 1920.

Hershfield handles his characters with great warmth, compassion and good humor.

2 according to Hoyle

according to Hoyle Edward Hoyle (1672–1769) was a British authority on card games, especially whist. His compilation of the rules governing these card games achieved worldwide acceptance.

Hoyle's name has entered the language in the phrase "according to Hoyle." By extension, it has come to mean behaving honorably, fairly, following the rules faithfully.

Use: "Gentlemen, we're undertaking a very important project. The company's survival may very well depend on how well we do our job. Everyone will be watching us. I want everything done according to Hoyle, no sharp practices, no corner-cutting."

Adams, Ansel Photographer (1902–1984) famous for his wide-angle American West landscapes of towering, snowcapped mountains and great trees. His pictures, which have been reproduced in more than 35 books, helped to establish photography as a legitimate art form with its own way of seeing.

Addams, Charles American cartoonist (1912–1988) who for 50 years contributed his outrageously macabre humor to the *New Yorker*. He created an Addams family, an Addams house and Addams situations that are all ghoulish. In one well-known cartoon he shows a slinky, witch-like family on the roof of their haunted-looking Victorian house. It is Christmas and they are about to pour upon the carolers below a cauldron-full of boiling oil. In another cartoon Addams depicts a weird-looking man waiting outside a delivery room. The nurse is saying, "Congratulations! It's a baby!" His spooky, archetypal work antedated and paved the way for "black humor."

A Charles Addams is any weird person, house or situation that suggests a macabre sense of humor, a topsy-turvy sense of values.

Adler, Polly As practitioner and entrepreneur in prostitution, the "oldest profession," Polly Adler (1900–1962) was widely known as "the last of the great madams" and her establishment as "New York's most famous bordello."

In her autobiography, *A House Is Not a Home*, Polly Adler boasts of "a clientele culled not only from *Who's Who* and *The Social Register*—but from *Burke's Peerage* and *The Almanac de Gotha*." Her "guests" also included politicians, gangsters (Dutch Schultz, Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano), writers, etc. She and her "girls"

worked out of fashionable, lavishly decorated apartments equipped with bars and dining rooms.

After a highly colorful career, Polly Adler retired from her "business" in 1944 to write her autobiography and to pursue other, non-"business" activities.

Use: In 1986, the book *Mayflower Madam* appeared, an account of how Sydney Biddle Barrows, whose ancestors arrived in America on the *Mayflower*, started and ran a successful, slick, elegant, modern "call girl" enterprise called Cachet. When the police finally "busted" her for running what in an older parlance was called a "disorderly house," Miss Barrows was widely described as another Polly Adler, though her business methods and entrepreneurial skills differed somewhat from Miss Adler's.

Adlerian In accordance with psychoanalytical theories and treatment formulated by Alfred Adler (1870–1937). Adler started out as a disciple of Freud but broke away from the Master because he rejected Freud's emphasis on sex. To Adler the individual's drive for power, his desire for superiority, often to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, was at the heart of neurosis.

Adler coined the phrases "inferiority complex" and "superiority complex."

Afghanistan In December 1979, Soviet troops invaded the small central Asian country of Afghanistan in order to prop up their unpopular communist puppet regime in Kabul. For 10 years they were unable to prevail against the Afghan Mujahedeen, Islamic guerrilla warriors who controlled the mountain passes with arms supplied mostly by the United States, West Germany and Japan. In spite of almost universal condemnation by the United Nations, the loss of thousands of lives and the drain on their resources, the Soviet Union did not pull out its forces until 1989. The fire that Leonid Brezhnev started was finally put out by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Afghanistan is to the Soviet Union what Vietnam is to the United States, a humiliating defeat of a great power by a tiny country.

Use: "[Russia's] armies had just suffered a stunning defeat in the Crimean War, which proved to be an 'Afghanistan' many times over, sapping Russian morale and sense of mission." (*New York Times*, July 29, 1989)

4 Alcatraz

Alcatraz In 1868, the United States War Department established a prison for deserters on Alcatraz, an island in San Francisco harbor. In 1934 Alcatraz was taken over by the Department of Justice as a "super-prison for super criminals" who couldn't be contained in the regular federal prisons.

The warden, James A. Johnston, ruled "The Rock" (as Alcatraz was known) with an iron hand. Under his stern, unsentimental administration, Alcatraz became known as America's Devil's Island, characterized by maximum security, minimum privileges, a rule of silence, prisoners locked up 14 hours a day, no trustee system, bad behavior punished by beatings and special handcuffs, straitjackets and solitary confinement ("the hole").

Some inmates tried to escape. None succeeded. Some tried suicide. Others became insane. The infamous Al Capone, master criminal, was sent here. He was paroled in 1939, suffering from advanced syphilis. Widespread criticism of Alcatraz's methods led to its closing in 1963.

Alcatraz has become a symbol for escape-proof, harsh, cruel prisons.

Alger, Horatio, Jr. American writer (1832–1899) of 119 boys' books, in which the heroes begin as poor newsboys or bootblacks and rise to great wealth and influence. He encapsulated in each book the American dream of rags to riches.

Use: "*The Ragman's Son* is an American myth wrapped inside an American myth. Horatio Alger with a Russian-Jewish accent. The poor immigrant's kid who becomes a millionaire movie star." (Susan Stamberg reviewing the autobiography of Kirk Douglas; *New York Times*, August 14, 1988)

Alibi Ike Main character and title of a 1924 short story by RING LARDNER (1885–1933). Later, a comic strip.

An Alibi Ike is a person who always has a ready excuse.

All-American Originally, an honor conferred on the outstanding football players at each team position. In 1889, the first All-American team was chosen by the famous football player, coach and authority, Walter Camp, for the magazine *Weeks' Sports*. Today, All-American athletes are chosen in many other sports.

All-American now stands for general, all-around excellence.

Use: "Bill's a clean-cut, all-American boy."

all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others From George Orwell's satirical fable *Animal Farm* (1945). The animals on Mr. Jones's farm stage a revolution against their human masters and drive them out. The pigs, under their leader Napoleon, take over. Corrupted by power, they in turn become tyrannical and rationalize their hegemony with the above slogan.

Used cynically or satirically to demolish the hypocrisy of claims to absolute equality in the face of a privileged elite.

Allen, Woody United States film director, writer, actor, comedian (1935-). Uses autobiographical material, especially his own soul-searching for meaning in the universe. A Woody Allen movie is usually funny, philosophical, cerebral, satirical, with a New York City, middle-class Jewish milieu. His films include *Sleeper* (1973), *Bananas* (1971), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Radio Days* (1987).

"Allen's Alley" Radio show starring Fred Allen. Allen's Alley was a street with odd characters, and Fred Allen was its man on the street. Every Sunday, Allen, as a weary pollster, knocked on doors and posed his "tiny questions" to radio's most hilarious interviewees.

"All in the Family" This TV sitcom made its revolutionary debut on January 12, 1971. It changed the face of the TV situation-comedy. For the first time, TV audiences found themselves watching and listening to a different kind of "relevance." "All in the Family" confronted formerly taboo issues and subjects with new openness and humor. Race, color, feminism, homosexuality, menopause etc. had come out of the closet.

"All in the Family" introduced a new type of comedy, with shouting, ethnic jokes and epithets. The audiences loved seeing the characters having at each other with an intensity and abandon that they were witnessing for the first time.

The central character, Archie Bunker, is the quintessential racist and bigot. Perhaps because he is made to overplay his role, he remains the audience's favorite butt.

6 all quiet on the western front

all quiet on the western front Phrase used in military communiqués and newspapers during World War I to indicate no dramatic action, only the usual attrition in the trenches. Erich Maria Remarque used the phrase with irony and bitterness in his 1929 novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, about the German infantry in World War I, because men were still suffering and dying when it was "all quiet on the western front."

The phrase has been used in nonmilitary situations, but always with irony, as when tensions in a school over certain incidents are hushed up and someone mordantly observes, "all's quiet on the western front."

Use: A newspaper headline, "All Is Far From Quiet on The Western Front," covers a story about opposition to Mortimer Zuckerman's development plans for the western arc of Columbus Circle in New York City and for Donald Trump's West Side project, Television City. (*New York Times*, October 11, 1987)

Alphonse and Gaston A super-polite team of Frenchmen created by the gifted cartoonist Fred Opper for Hearst's Sunday papers in the early 1900s. Flamboyantly dressed as 19th-century French dandies, they observed a code of highly artificial good manners:

"You first, my dear Alphonse."

"No-no-you first, my dear Gaston."

They were universally understood as "symbols of excessive politeness."

American Dream A vision of America as a land of opportunity, a land in which every individual may achieve his innate potential regardless of sex, color, religion, class, circumstances of birth etc. The dream drew millions of immigrants to the United States and propelled them across a continent. The dream is often corrupted to mean a mere drive for materialistic values. The tragic toll taken by the pursuit of the American Dream has been portrayed in such utterly different novels as *Giants in the Earth* (1924) by Ole Rølvaag, *An American Tragedy* (1925) by Theodore Dreiser and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Use: "Talk about the American Dream! Here is the most seductive, the most magical, the cushiest and dreamiest American dream of

them all—winning the capitalist jackpot, the whole damn thing just dropping into your lap out of nowhere. Only for Senator Quayle it isn't a dream—to him this looks like reality. No wonder that of all the performers in the '88 election, he alone plays his role to perfection." (Philip Roth on Op-Ed page, *New York Times*, September 19, 1988.)

American Gothic Painting by American regionalist Grant Wood (1892–1942). The 1930 canvas is filled with a closeup of an American farm couple posed stiffly against their house. The couple looms almost as large as the house, which has a Gothic, arched attic window. They are immaculately and precisely dressed in farm clothing, the man in a jacket and overalls and carrying a pitchfork; the woman in a cover-all apron over a Peter Pan-collared dress. Their expression is determined, dour, even fierce. The artist's treatment of them seems double-edged—half epic, half ironic.

The popular use of the term American Gothic certainly is meant to indicate satirically stiff, upright, precise and correct.

American Legion National organization of military service veterans chartered by Congress in 1919, with posts throughout the country and a strong lobby in Washington, D.C. Associated with veterans advocacy, super-patriotism, flag-waving and parades, and fervid opposition to communism.

An American Tragedy Novel published in 1925 by Theodore Dreiser (1876–1945), based on the Chester Gillette–Grace Brown murder case of 1906. The protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, is ashamed of his poverty-stricken, street evangelist parents. He yearns for the wealth, the easy living, the mobility of the world he first encounters as a bellhop in a hotel. At his uncle's home in upper New York State, he comes in contact with high society. His ambitions flare, especially when he senses the possibility of marrying the very wealthy Sondra Finchley. Unfortunately, he has already impregnated a poor factory girl, Roberta, who refuses an abortion. Faced with this dilemma, Clyde daydreams of murdering Roberta. Matters are taken out of his hands after Roberta accidentally drowns when their rowboat capsizes. Clyde is arrested, tried and sentenced to death. Dreiser, through the defense attorney, indicts society for the crime, for filling youthful

8 America's Sweetheart

heads with false, tawdry, glittering illusions. Dreiser exposes the shoddy American dream of success based on materialistic values.

America's Sweetheart Nickname given to Mary Pickford (born Gladys Smith, 1893–1979), for 23 years the most popular screen star in the world. Pickford invariably played Little Mary, the pure, innocent but self-reliant girl with the long blonde curls and the sweet smile, just on the verge of womanhood. She appeared in many films, including *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Daddy Long Legs*, and *The Little American*. The marriage of America's Sweetheart to Douglas Fairbanks, the all-American male, represented in real life a kind of epiphany of movie dreamland.

Now used tongue-in-cheek for a too-sweet, too-pure, too-popular girl.

"Amos 'N' Andy" A "blackface" radio comedy created by Freeman Gosden (Amos) and Charles Correll (Andy), it appeared in 1929 on NBC, sponsored by Pepsodent. It was an immediate, overwhelming success, one of the first truly original creations of early radio. A vast audience was charmed by its wit and warmth.

In 1950, "Amos 'N' Andy" moved into television—only to discover that a new era had come into being, demanding an end to "blackface" comedy. All black characters henceforth were to be played by black actors.

With superb actors, directors and writers, "Amos 'N' Andy" continued to charm its new audience. But the growing civil rights movement found the depiction of blacks in "Amos 'N' Andy" offensive and damaging to the image of blacks in America. Continued pressure led to the withdrawal of "Amos 'N' Andy" from syndication in 1966.

Despite the critical acclaim, it was held that "one of the finest ensemble casts of any color" still tended to perpetuate black stereotypes.

angry young man Expression applied to certain British playwrights and novelists of the 1950s and to the characters they created. Their heroes were usually lower-middle-class, anti-establishment rebels. Outstanding examples are: John Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* (1956 play); Kingsley Amis in *Lucky Jim* (1954, novel); and Alan